



# ORGANIC VIEW

A PUBLICATION OF THE ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION

Quarterly Edition

Fall 1999

## OCA Sends Letter to USDA Supporting Cost-Share Program

OCA signed a letter to the USDA in October, along with over 45 other organizations, calling for the upcoming national organic standards to include a cost-share program for organic farmers. The cost-share program would be designed for small organic farmers to help offset the costs of organic certification and encourage the participation of more farmers in the organic certification program.

Without a strong cost-share program, a majority of current organic farmers would not be able to be certified due to the fees and other expenses associated with the certification process under the next proposed national organic standards. The USDA is expected to come out with its next round of proposed national standards for organic food early in the year 2000.

The state of Minnesota passed the first state cost-share program to help organic farmers this summer. Available through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the program will reimburse Minnesota organic producers for up to two-thirds of the cost for organic inspection and certification. Producers will be eligible for up to five years of payments, with a maximum annual payment of \$200 per producer.

OCA's Debbie Ortman was appointed by the Governor to be part of an Organic Advisory Task Force (OATF) which includes organic farmers, certifiers, a food retailer, state university/extension representatives, and non-profit organization representatives. The OATF will review certifiers who want to operate in Minnesota and advise the Commissioner of Agriculture on the National Organic Standards and other organic issues.

## 47 Congressmen Call On FDA To Label Genetically Engineered Foods

A letter to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) calling for the labeling of genetically engineered foods was signed by a bi-partisan group of 48 Members of Congress in November. OCA had been active in calling for volunteers and supporters nationwide to contact their Member of Congress to sign on to the letter being circulated by US Representative David Bonior (D-MI). OCA would like to thank all of you who contacted your elected representatives in support of this important letter.

The signers of the letter called on the FDA to enforce the labeling provisions of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act which are intended to ensure that consumers are provided thorough information and are not misled about the characteristics of their food. These provisions require the FDA to label genetically engineered or modified foods, the Representatives asserted.

OCA joined a diverse alliance of religious, farm, consumer and environmental organizations in calling for Members of Congress to sign on to this letter. Other organizations supporting the Bonior letter included: Adrian Dominican

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FDA is already facing a lawsuit challenging its failure to require pre-market safety testing, labeling and full environmental review of genetically engineered corn, soy, and other crops. The suit was filed by the Alliance for Bio-Integrity, Center for Food Safety, scientists, and members of major religious organizations.



## **National Organic Standards Board Told To Address Drift**

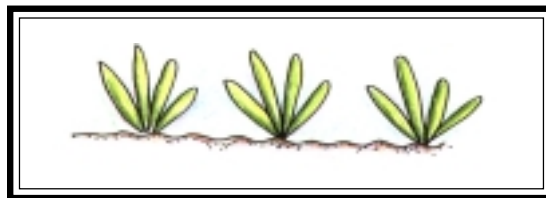
Representatives from the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (NCSS), including OCA, told the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) earlier this week to address several threats that genetic engineering poses to organic food production.

The NOSB, established as part of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, is set up to make recommendations to the US Department of Agriculture in establishing national standards for organic food. The NOSB is composed of organic producers, farmers, certifiers, and environmental and consumer representatives.

Speaking on behalf of NCSS, Michael Sligh, of Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), urged the NOSB to not let complications delay the Board in addressing immediate threats to organic farming from the drift of genetically engineered material. Additionally, the NOSB should encourage the USDA to seek remedies that do not place the burden of proof or liability on organic farmers for genetic contamination. Instead, the USDA should follow the "polluter pays" principle. The USDA should immediately begin tracking genetically engineered crops by location and have that information published regularly so that organic farmers can gauge the risk of genetic drift to their farms.

NCSS also recommended that the NOSB pass resolutions endorsing social/economic equity in reference to workers and in support of biodiversity.

To send comments to the National Organic Standards Board concerning the issues mentioned above, go to:  
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/nosbemail.htm>



## **National Family Farm Coalition November Statement on Genetically Engineered Crops**

"Genetic engineering in agriculture has significantly increased the economic uncertainty of family farmers throughout the U.S. and the world. American farmers have lost critical markets which are closed to genetically engineered products. Corporate control of the seed supply threatens farmers' independence. The risk of genetic drift has made it difficult and expensive for farmers to market a pure product. Genetic engineering has created social and economic disruption that threatens traditional agricultural practices for farmers around the world. Farmers, who have maintained the consumer's trust by producing safe, reasonably priced and nutritious food, now fear losing that trust as a result of consumer rejection of genetically engineered foods. Many scientists believe genetically engineered organisms have been released into the environment and the food supply without adequate testing. Farmers who have used this new technology may be facing massive liability from damage caused by genetic drift, increased weed and pest resistance, and the destruction of wildlife and beneficial insects."

## Hain To Start Labeling GMO-Free

In October, Hain Food Group announced that it will label its Little Bear line of natural snacks as genetically engineered - free. Hain is switching the oil it uses in its fryers from corn to safflower, a plant yet to be genetically engineered.

"The more press it gets, the more it will become an issue for consumers," Andrew Jacobson, a senior executive of Hain Food Group Inc. recently told the Wall Street Journal.

Several major food companies are now reacting to what they see as growing consumer opposition to genetically engineered foods. Heinz has announced that it hopes to avoid using genetically modified crops in all its US products. "We're very concerned about consumer sentiment," a Heinz spokesperson told the Wall Street Journal.

Worthington Foods, which makes Morningstar Farms veggie burgers, says it will no longer use genetically engineered soybeans. Worthington Foods' responded after a Consumer Reports' test found that Morningstar Farms veggie burgers contained genetically engineered soy.

The Wall Street Journal also reported that the food industry is commissioning surveys to track public sentiment toward biotechnology, and Hershey is among several companies evaluating how quickly they could switch their factories from genetically engineered ingredients if necessary.

## Consumer Reports Finds Genetically Engineered Foods on Supermarket Shelves

Tests published in the September issue of Consumer Reports reveal that a host of everyday groceries contain ingredients made from genetically engineered crops. Products testing positive include baby formulas, tortilla chips, drink mixes, taco shells, veggie burgers and muffin mix.

Consumer Reports shopped at grocery stores throughout the country and bought a variety of processed foods containing corn or soybeans, ingredients most likely to be genetically engineered. None of the foods bought by Consumers Reports were labeled as genetically engineered, but DNA analysis showed genetically engineered ingredients in:

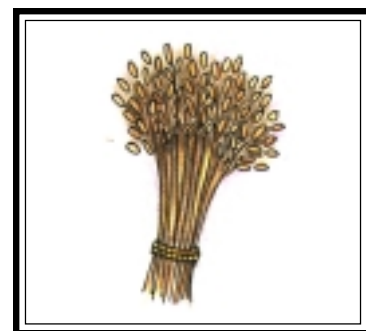
- \* Three powdered infant formulas: Enfamil ProSobee, Soy Formula, Similac Isomil Soy Formula, and Nestle Carnation
- \* Alsoy
- \* Several soy burger products, including Boca Burger Chef, Max's Favorite, Morningstar Farms Better 'n Burgers, and Green Giant Harvest Burgers (now called Morningstar Farms Harvest Burgers). McDonald's McVeggie Burgers also showed GE ingredients
- \* Ovaltine Malt powdered beverage mix
- \* Bac-Os Bacon Flavor bits
- \* Bravos Tortilla Chips Nacho Nacho!
- \* Old El Paso 12 Taco Shells
- \* Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix

Only three years following the first large-scale commercial harvest, genetically engineered crops cover one-fourth of U.S. cropland—more than 90 million acres—according to 1999 industry estimates. That includes more than 35 percent of all corn, almost 55 percent of all soybeans, and nearly half of all cotton. None of the genetically engineered crops and foods are required to be labeled.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Glickman told Consumer Reports, "Frankly, if the consumers demand labeling—even if we think it doesn't convey a lot of good stuff—we're probably going to end up with a labeling scheme."

But any labeling that does not specify which foods/ingredients are genetically modified, and what foreign genes have been inserted is virtually useless to consumers.

As Consumer Reports wrote, "If US consumers want to avoid (genetically engineered) food, their only option is to buy organic products."



## **Cuban Organic Farming Association Wins Alternative Nobel Prize**

The Grupo de Agricultura Organica (GAO), the Cuban organic farming association, which has been at the forefront of the country's transition from industrial to organic agriculture, was named winner of a major international prize—the Right Livelihood Award—commonly known as the 'Alternative Nobel Prize.'

The Grupo de Agricultura Organica is one of four winners of the 1999 Right Livelihood Award, chosen from more than 80 candidates from 40 countries. GAO brings together farmers, farm managers, field experts, researchers, and government officials to develop and promote organic farming methods.

Its aim is to convince Cuban farmers and policy-makers that the country's previous high-input farming model was too import-dependent and environmentally damaging to be sustainable, and that the organic alternative has the potential to achieve equally good yields.

During the 1990s Cuba overcame a severe food shortage caused by the collapse of its trade relations with the former Soviet-bloc and the on-going U.S. trade embargo. Self-reliant organic farming played a significant role in overcoming the crisis.



## **Genetic Engineering A Hot Topic at Organic Expo**

Keeping genetic engineering out of organic food products was the hot topic at the National Products Expo East held in October in Baltimore. Several OCA staff attended the large organic trade conference and talked with numerous co-op managers and organic food producers.

Based on conversations, it was clear that genetically engineered foods and crops are causing several problems for organic producers, particularly for organic processed food. Genetic drift poses a direct threat to organic food production. The organic chip maker Terra Prima had to recall its corn chips from Europe after genetically engineered material had contaminated their organic corn source in Texas.

Of equal concern is the difficulty in ensuring that non-organic ingredients such as lecithin, cottonseed oil, soy oil and canola oil, are GE-free. Corn, soybeans, cotton and canola are the most common genetically engineered crops. Engineered crops are unlabeled and mixed with other conventional crops. This poses a difficult challenge for organic producers.

In a talk on genetic engineering before conference participants, OCA Campaign Director Ronnie Cummins encouraged organic and natural food companies to research their sources for ingredients and get written affidavits that those ingredients are not genetically engineered.

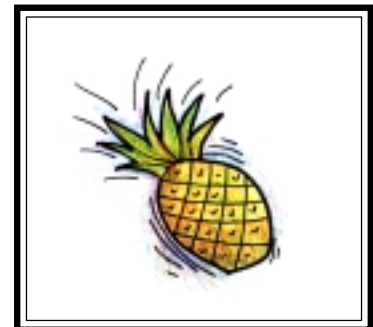
Genetically engineered ingredients are prohibited in certified organic food. However, certified organic

processed food can contain a small percentage of conventional ingredients - ingredients difficult to find as organic. Because genetically engineered foods and crops are unlabeled, and thus far have been mixed together with conventional crops, it is impossible to know whether conventional crops or ingredients contain genetically engineered material without expensive testing.

## **Berkeley Schools Go Organic. How Did They Do It?**

When the Berkeley, California school system approved a plan to introduce organic food in its lunch program, it made headlines in newspapers from Washington, DC to Los Angeles. The groundbreaking effort to bring organic food and agriculture directly to students was the culmination of over three years of hard work to improve the quality of food in the cafeteria.

Besides offering organic options, the Berkeley school district plan bans the use of genetically engineered foods, irradiated foods, and dairy products from cows injected with the recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH). Other goals of the district's plan include establishing a child nutrition advisory committee and eliminating food additives and high-fat, high-



sugar snacks and entrees.

According to Jered Lawson, coordinator at Berkeley Food Systems Project, critical to the success of the Berkeley project is establishing organic gardens at every school in the district. Students will be able to grow, prepare and eat their harvest. Administrators hope to defray some of the added expense of purchasing organic foods by growing 25% of the produce on the campuses themselves. Eleven of Berkeley's 16 schools already have gardens, most notably the Edible School Yard at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, created by the famed California chef of Chez Panisse - Alice Waters.

Under the plan, students will still have the option to eat other foods in the school cafeteria, including turkey hot dogs and hamburgers, burritos and vegetarian dishes. But according to Lawson, the organic oranges and organic after school snacks are already a big hit.

Berkeley's organic program, to be phased in over the next several years, is truly revolutionary - unlike any in the country. How did they do it?

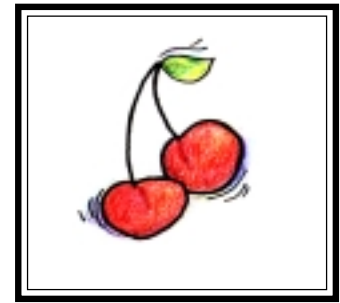
Like most innovative programs at schools, it began with interested parents. Three years ago, concerned parent Ray Couture walked into the office of the Berkeley School Superintendent and demanded that the nutritional content of the food served to students be improved. The conversation resulted in a parent

administrator task force established during the school year 1996-1997. The task force worked with the local Center for Ecoliteracy to establish the Berkeley Food Systems Project. Well-known former California State Assemblyman Tom Bates' involvement added credibility to the project.

The district also benefited from a three-year \$175,000 grant from the US Department of Agriculture's Community Foods Security Program ([http://www.reeusda.gov/food\\_security/foodshp.htm](http://www.reeusda.gov/food_security/foodshp.htm)), which helped start the district's organic gardens and establish a food policy for the district.

Of course, Berkeley also benefits greatly from its geographic location. The school district is close to year-round organic farms in Sonoma, Marin and Mendocino counties, so fresh food is easier to find during winter months.

The Berkeley program has also drawn heavily on other school programs from around the country that connect children with the food they eat. Also in California, Santa Monica schools have experimented



with a Farmers Market salad bar. Schools in three other states — Vermont, North Carolina and Florida — also were granted funds from the USDA's Community Foods Security Program.

Food Works in Montpelier, VT has developed a simple how-to resource guide detailing how to create beautiful and practical food, herb and flower gardens with children.

To order the guide, call (800) 360-1515, or e-mail: [rootsnet@plainfield.bypass.com](mailto:rootsnet@plainfield.bypass.com)

More information about the Berkeley schools organic program will be up on the web in a few months at: [www.foodsystems.org](http://www.foodsystems.org)

### **Thanks for your support of the Organic Consumers Association**

#### **Staff**

**Ronnie Cummins, Campaign Director - [director@organicconsumers.org](mailto:director@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Ben Lilliston, Communications Director - [news@organicconsumers.org](mailto:news@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Marnie Glickman, Political Director - [mglickman@organicconsumers.org](mailto:mglickman@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Debbie Ortman, National Field Organizer - [campaign@organicconsumers.org](mailto:campaign@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Simon Harris, West Coast Organizer, - [simon@organicconsumers.org](mailto:simon@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Rose Welch, Program Associate - [info@organicconsumers.org](mailto:info@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Karin Smith, Database Manager - [info@organicconsumers.org](mailto:info@organicconsumers.org)**  
**Judy Linman, Office Manager - [info@organicconsumers.org](mailto:info@organicconsumers.org)**

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