

# Retailers, Are You Ready to Come Clean?

## Will You Follow Whole Foods Market's Lead and Adopt an Organic Cosmetics Integrity Policy?

**T**he Organic Consumers Association (OCA), the nation's largest consumer group dedicated to organic integrity, is encouraging retailers to take action to address widespread organic labeling fraud in their health and beauty care aisles.

Many brands make organic claims on products whose main cleansing and moisturizing ingredients are composed in significant part of petrochemicals.

In June 2010, Whole Foods Market took a bold and meaningful step on behalf of organic integrity when it adopted a new requirement for its suppliers that will force major organic cheater brands to drop their bogus organic claims.



**The new Whole Foods Market policy on the organic labeling of personal care products states:**

“We believe that the ‘organic’ claim used on personal care products should have a very similar meaning to the ‘organic’ claim used on food products, which is currently regulated by the USDA’s National Organic Program. Our shoppers do not expect the definition of ‘organic’ to change substantially between the food and the non-food aisles of our stores.”

Whole Foods’ new policy mandates that “Organic” or “Made with Organic Ingredients” claims must be certified under the USDA National Organic Program, just like food. A more limited “Contains Organic Ingredients” claim for personal care may be certified under the NSF ANSI 305 standard. Organic claims that are not certified, including “Organics” in branding, will not be allowed.

Brands were required to meet an August 1, 2010, deadline to explain how they would change their labeling or formulations to comply with the new standard. They have until June, 2011 to be in full compliance. Brands that did not submit a plan to come clean are expected to be dropped from store shelves.

Retailers selling non-certified “organic” cosmetics face a choice. They can follow Whole Foods’ lead and require truthful labels, or they can continue to enable organic fraud. Consumers will look unfavorably on retailers that duck responsibility and continue to profit from the organic cheater brands that rip off their customers.

### What will your store do?

Submit your Organic Cosmetics Integrity Policy to be listed as a preferred Coming Clean Campaign retailer at [organicconsumers.org/bodycare/](http://organicconsumers.org/bodycare/)



ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION

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CAMPAIGNING FOR HEALTH, JUSTICE, SUSTAINABILITY, PEACE, AND DEMOCRACY

## Well, Is It Organic or Not? • by Douglas Quenqua • *New York Times* • July 14, 2010

**I**t can be hard enough to decipher the term “organic” when it comes to food. Are there hormones in that skim milk? Did those chicken wings get enough exercise?

But when it comes to personal care items like toothpaste and body lotion, claims like “made with organic ingredients” or “authentically organic” can flummox even the greenest consumer. No federal agency polices organic claims for personal care items — at least not yet — so manufacturers have been able to use these customer-pleasing terms loosely and liberally. But now Whole Foods Market is blowing the whistle. As of next June, the retailer will require all health and beauty products making organic claims to be certified by one of two sources: either the Agriculture Department’s National Organic Program, which sets standards for food; or NSF International, a nonprofit based in Ann Arbor, Mich., that issues its own certification mark.

As of June 1, 2011, any products that make organic claims and don’t get the certification will be removed from the shelves of Whole Foods stores. (The company will continue to carry nonorganic products as long as they don’t make organic claims.)

“We’re trying to make it so that our customers don’t have to switch standards and expectations when they cross from grocery into the body care aisle,” said Joe Dickson, the Whole Foods quality standards coordinator. The policy, announced June 18, is already shaking things up among companies that make — or claim to make — organic beauty items. Many of these companies rely on Whole Foods for the majority of their sales, so the new rule will have broad repercussions.

“People aren’t going to have two labels in the market, one for Whole Foods and one for everyone else,” said David Bronner, president of Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps, a line of products (most of them soaps) sold in Whole Foods and certified as organic by the Agriculture Department. As a result, he said, the Whole Foods policy could become the de facto standard.

“Right now we’re being drowned out by all these cheaters,” Mr. Bronner said. “But this has the potential to be a game changer.”

The Agriculture Department has been enforcing organic claims on food sold in the United States since 2002, but does not do the same for other items. The agency does invite manufacturers of personal care products to apply for its National Organic Program label, but it does not go after them if they make unsubstantiated claims.

Just who should be in charge of enforcing those claims has been the topic of some debate and at least one lawsuit. A spokeswoman for the Food and Drug Administration said that her agency and the Agriculture Department were working together to develop labeling standards, but that there was no projected due date.

Lynn Anne Miller, author of a blog called OrganicMania that purports to help people live more greenly, said that even she frequently finds herself unsure of what to buy.

“It’s hard because your kids are hanging on you, and you’re already trying to compare prices,” she said. “But then, standing in the aisle trying to read the ingredient list on a bottle of shampoo? It’s impractical.”

She once bought a lice shampoo for her children, at a local supermarket in the Washington area, that claimed to be all-natural and organic, but that turned out to contain at least six chemicals deemed risky by the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit advocacy group. “I was furious,”

she said. Organic activists are energized over the prospect that the new Whole Foods policy could bring some clarity to the organic health and beauty market. Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, said his group had been pressuring Whole Foods for years to adopt this sort of policy.

“We’re typically in a conflictive relationship with Whole Foods,” said Mr. Cummins, whose group contends that the store has been reluctant to crack down on manufacturers of not-quite-organic products, which account for a good portion of its bottom line. “But the good thing about them doing the right thing now is they’re such a big player that they move the whole industry.”

Mr. Dickson of Whole Foods said that the new policy was not expected to reduce revenue and that the only reason it wasn’t adopted sooner was that NSF International was still developing its standards.

It was Mr. Cummins’s group that sued the Agriculture Department in 2005 for its decision not to police organic personal care items. This past January, the group also filed a false-advertising suit against 14 companies that it said were making fraudulent organic claims.

Some Whole Foods competitors are happy about the new policy, even if they’re not ready to adopt it themselves. At Pharmaca, an organic pharmacy chain with 22 stores in the western United States, “We are eagerly awaiting the results” of the Whole Foods policy change, said Laura Coblentz, vice president for marketing.

Pharmaca hopes one day to be to the pharmacy business what Whole Foods is to grocery stores, but that doesn’t mean it will expunge questionable organic claims from its aisles. At least not soon.

“It’s very complicated in personal care,” said Ms. Coblentz, because many products rely on chemicals that can’t be made organically. These include surfactants, the active ingredient in many shampoos, and emulsifiers, which prevent separation in suspension liquids.

For now, Pharmaca will continue to stock certified and non-certified organic items, “because we want to give the choice to our consumers,” she said.

The dream scenario for organic activists is that the Whole Foods policy will prompt companies to revamp their formulas. But the reality is that, for now at least, many will simply change their labels.

Such is the case at Aubrey Organics, a 45-year-old company that makes everything from deodorant to dog shampoo. While many of its products have already earned organic certification, others have not — and cannot with their current formulation.

“There are just certain things that our raw-materials manufacturers haven’t figured out how to make organic yet,” said Curt Valva, general manager of Aubrey Organics, referring mostly to abrasive soaps and cleansers.

Rather than compromise the strength of its products, the company is instead creating a second brand known simply as Aubrey. “That’s what everyone calls us anyway,” Mr. Valva said. The new brand — without the organic claim — will be available at Whole Foods and alongside Aubrey Organics.

Ms. Miller, the blogger, said that branding changes like this will only sow more confusion. In an ideal world, she said, “Mom just needs to look for a trusted seal. If it’s there, it’s organic. If not, it’s not.”