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America's Organic Standards Under Attack

New Directives Implemented By USDA's National Organic Program Undermine Organic Standards

New York (NY) May 18, 2004 – Last month the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) announced new directives that seriously threaten the integrity of national organic standards.

The USDA will no longer monitor "organic" labels on non-agricultural products such as seafood, body care products, pet foods, fertilizers, and clothing. In addition, the USDA will now permit pesticides on crops, it will allow antibiotics and growth hormones to be injected into livestock, and non-organic fishmeal to be fed to cattle labeled as "organic."

These moves represent a serious attempt to degrade organic standards, which the public has come to rely on for food free of antibiotics and hormones, and most other pesticides and synthetic chemicals. In addition, they were implemented without input from the National Organic Standards Board or the public, despite the fact that the NOP is a public program paid for by taxpayers who have the right to comment on changes of this significance.

Products where the "organic" label will have no meaning

On April 14 the NOP announced a new "scope document" prohibiting the use of the USDA Organic Seal for personal care products, dietary supplements, fertilizers, soil amendments, pet foods, clothing and all fish. Under the new scope policy manufacturers are being given the green light to put phony "organic" labels on these products, which have effectively become unregulated with regards to organic standards.

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/GuidanceStatements/ScopeGuidance041304.pdf>

Prohibited pesticides can now be used in organic production

New directives announced on April 23 now allow pesticides to be used on organic crops even if farmers and certifiers don't know the specific ingredients contained in the pesticides – which may include ingredients that are prohibited under the NOP. Since it is not required by law for pesticides manufacturers to list most inert pesticide ingredients or formulas, it is very hard, if not impossible, for farmers to ascertain what specific ingredients are contained in pesticides. Under the previous regulations, if farmers didn't know whether prohibited ingredients were contained or not in certain pesticides, they were not allowed to use them. Now they can use any pesticide formulation before determining whether it contains prohibited ingredients.

<http://www.organicconsumers.org/organic/usdapesticidedirective.pdf>

Organic dairy cows can potentially be injected with antibiotics or synthetic growth hormones

According to the new directives, individual dairy cows can be treated with antibiotics or any drug (including synthetic growth hormones) at any time as long as the milk from these cows is sold 12 months after the treatment. This directive encourages the potential development of factory farms with dual operations in which organic and non-organic production are conducted simultaneously and thousands of organic cows are kept in intensive confinement, further increasing the risk of disease and the continued use of preventive or treatment drugs. In addition, the use of antibiotics will reduce the pressure on organic farmers to provide healthy accommodations for their livestock, knowing that they can treat animals with antibiotics.

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/GuidanceStatements/AntibioticGuidance041304.pdf>

Organic beef can be fed non-organic mercury and PCB-laden fishmeal

Non-organic fishmeal (the USDA has halted the use of the organic label on any fish product), which can contain mercury, PCB's, antibiotics and other synthetic preservatives, can now be fed as protein supplement to cattle whose beef can still be labeled as organic.

<http://www.organicconsumers.org/organic/usdafeedirective.pdf>

GRACE (Global Resource Action Center for the Environment) is a not-for-profit organization that works to oppose factory farming and promote a sustainable food production system that is healthful and humane, economically viable, and environmentally sound. For more information, visit www.gracelinks.org.

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