



The Organic Specialists

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"Cheers to a new year and another chance for us to get it right."

Oprah Winfrey

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As we enter the second half of the second decade of the 21st century, one thing hasn't changed: Agriculture remains in the news. Sometimes, we cheer, as when we heard about the latest meta-analysis of studies that examined organic and conventional yields. One of the study authors and co-director of the Berkeley Food Institute, Claire Kerman, emphasized that the findings in the study show organic farming as a viable competitor to conventional food production and avoids environmental impacts of industrial agriculture, even as synthetic fertilizers' ability to increase yields has been declining. Having the United Nations draw attention to the importance of healthy soil throughout the year is also good news for organic growers.

On the other hand, some reports are challenging. When the Wall Street Journal reported on the status of enforcement actions and the number of certifiers cited for incorrectly enforcing organic regulations, shoppers are not getting the full story of the rigorous nature of the organic certification system. Are there challenges ahead to improve the system? Yes, continuous improvement is challenging, especially when viewed from the outside with limited context and lack of knowledge of the details involved. Continuous improvement can feel like a failure to complete the mission. But we need to keep our eyes on the goal: Building healthy soil, and an agriculture system based on what's best for the earth that sustains us. One way we'll do that is to help you develop organic plans and comments on upcoming regulations. Let us know how we can help with the challenges your business faces.

Bill Wolf
President

**Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates delivers the strategic expertise to help organic, socially, and environmentally responsible products and projects reach their full potential—and flourish.*

ORGANIC REGULATORY AND MARKET UPDATES

National Organic Program Updates

New rules would extend promotion order exemptions - Comment by January 15

Proposed regulations would make additional organic operations exempt from assessments for commodity promotion activities under 23 Federal marketing orders and 22 research and promotion orders. The exemption would cover all 'organic' and '100 percent organic' products certified according to the National Organic program. Currently, only people who exclusively produce and market products certified as 100 percent organic are eligible for an exemption from assessments under commodity promotion programs. [Comments are due January 15.](#)

Guidance document on natural resources and biodiversity - Comment by February 27

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service seeks comment on Draft Guidance: Natural Resources and Biodiversity Conservation for Certified Organic Operations, which is designed to help certified organic operations understand the kinds of production practices that support conservation and comply with National Organic Program regulations. This guidance also clarifies: 1) the certified organic operator's responsibility to select, carry out, and record production practices that "maintain or improve the natural resources of the operation;" 2) the accredited certifying agent's (certifier) responsibility to verify operator compliance with this requirement; and 3) how domestic organic operations that participate in a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) program and the National Organic Program (NOP) can reduce their paperwork burdens. An appendix lists examples of practices to address soil composition, soil stability, water quality and quantity, wildlife benefits and more, and if NRCS programs may be available to assist.

[Comment by Feb. 27.](#)

Chime in on conservation program rules

Interim rules for two conservation assistance programs are up for comment due to changes resulting from 2014 Farm Bill:

Comment on interim rules for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) by January 20:

CSP provides financial and technical assistance to eligible producers to conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. Changes in the program include additional contract renewal provisions, changes criteria for lands that can be enrolled in the program, reduces the amount of land that can be enrolled in the program, and more. [Comment on docket number NRCS-2014-0008-0001.](#)

Comment on interim rules for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) by February 10:

The program assists with conservation practices that provide environmental benefits, and revisions are primarily for expanding participation among historically underserved populations, including special priority for beginning agricultural producers and socially disadvantaged producers with preference for military veterans. Those in organic operations may want to read the definitions for the organic system plan and the limits on payments for organic operations. [Submit comments on NRCS-2014-0007-0001.](#)

NOP outlines what to do to appeal an adverse certification action

NOP outlined the process and potential outcomes for [appeals of adverse actions](#) relating to organic certification and accreditation. Examples of adverse actions include, but are not limited to, proposed suspension of certification or accreditation; proposed revocation of certification or accreditation; denial of certification or accreditation; combined notice of noncompliance and proposed suspension or revocation; cease and desist notice; and denial of reinstatement. All appeals are to be reviewed and decided in an unbiased manner.

NOP wants a review of BPA in organic packaging

The National Organic Program, apparently spurred by requests from Senator Dianne Feinstein and a request from the NOSB Handling Subcommittee, has requested that the National Organic Standards Board review the use of Bisphenol A (BPA) in packaging of organic food. NOP will commission a technical review, and provide information about BPA and similar packaging materials. BPA has been used in many products, including reusable water bottles and as a lining in metal food and beverage cans.

NOP to establish transparent peer review process

As part of establishing a “repeatable, transparent peer review process,” the NOP has asked the National Organic Standards Board to provide a proposal for potential changes to the Peer Review of National Organic Program (NOP) Accreditation instructions. The instructions would establish a peer review panel, which would examine a sample of three to five NOP accreditation decisions.

US organic regulations available in Spanish

Spanish-speaking farmers, handlers and certifiers can read the [USDA organic regulations](#) and [handbook](#) in Spanish.

NEWS AND NOTICES

Organic farm census begins

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service sent surveys to organic farms. Of note are questions about economic hardships due to unintended presence of genetically modified material; organic production practices and challenges of organic production. Please return the survey by February 13 if you received it; if you are or know an organic farmer who did not receive the survey, please call NASS at (888) 424-7828.

Research sheds light on differences between organic and conventional crop yields

University of California-Berkeley researchers examined 115 studies comparing organic and conventional farming and found that crop yield of organic agriculture are higher than previously thought. Furthermore, they discovered that certain farming practices, especially multi-cropping and crop rotation, could shrink the gap between organic and conventional production even further. Differences in yields varied depending on the crop type, with no significant differences between yields of organic and conventional leguminous crops. The study, Diversification practices reduce organic to conventional yield gap, was published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B. [More](#).

Organic price options for crop insurance grow slowly

The Risk Management Agency continues to research organic prices and add new organic price elections to the federal crop insurance programs. Organic farmers seeking crop insurance can use the organic price elections when available, or use a contracted price for their organic farm products. If neither is available, then losses are calculated based on the price of conventional crops. According to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the most recent crops with organic price elections are: Millet, figs, walnuts, flax, popcorn, corn silage, hybrid seed corn, grain sorghum, silage sorghum, and hybrid sorghum seed. Look for the next round of additions to organic price elections in mid-2015.

2015 marks the International Year of Soils

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization will celebrate 2015 as the International Year of Soils to highlight the importance of healthy soil for food security and environmental health. The United States Department of Agriculture, through the Natural Resources Conservation Service in conjunction with Soil Science Society of America and others, will participate with monthly themes:

- January - Soils Sustain Life
- February - Soils Support Urban Life
- March - Soils Support Agriculture
- April - Soils Clean and Capture Water
- May - Soils Support Buildings/Infrastructure
- June - Soils Support Recreation
- July - Soils Are Living
- August - Soils Support Health
- September - Soils Protect the Natural Environment
- October - Soils and Products We Use
- November - Soils and Climate
- December - Soils, Culture and People

Natural foods pioneer Michio Kushi dies

Instrumental in bringing the macrobiotic diet to the United States, Michio Kushi died December 28 at age 88 of pancreatic cancer. Along with his wife, Aveline, Kushi founded the Erewhon natural foods brand and later the Kushi Institute in Becket, Massachusetts.

Volunteer for California's organic advisory committee

California's Organic Product Advisory Committee, which advises the California Department of Food and Agriculture and makes recommendations to the California State Organic Program, seeks volunteers to fill vacancies on the board. Open seats include alternates for producers, processors, consumer representatives, technical representatives, and wholesale. A retail representative seat is also open. Additional openings are expected in November 2015. Contact Laurel Rudolph (laurel.rudolph@cdfa.ca.gov) for more information.

WHERE TO FIND WOLF, DIMATTEO + ASSOCIATES

January 21-24, 2015: EcoFarm Conference, Pacific Grove, CA. Bill Wolf to attend.

February 5-7, 2015: Organicology Conference, Portland, OR. Katherine DiMatteo to speak; Bill Wolf to attend.

February 10-12, 2015: Accredited Certifiers Association Meeting, Little Rock, AR. Sandy Mays to attend.

February 27-28, 2015: First Western Regional Grazing Conference, Chico, CA. Bill Wolf to attend.

March 4-8, 2015: Natural Products Expo West, Anaheim, CA. WD+A staff to attend.

April 14-16, 2015: Organic Trade Association Policy Conference and Hill Visit Days, Washington, DC. Katherine DiMatteo to attend.

April 27-May 1, 2015: National Organic Standards Board Meeting, La Jolla, CA. Bill Wolf to attend.