

The path ahead for organic standards and policy

Two North American views

To get some idea of where the US organic sector is headed TOS posed a few questions to several North American leaders concerned with organic policy and standards. The discussion below is a synopsis of two of these interviews, one with Michel Saumur, Director of the Organic Office of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), and the other with Bill Wolf, President of Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates, a long time leader and respected consultant in the US organic sector. Their perspectives offer an interesting contrast between a viewpoint concerned with improving regulatory effectiveness and one oriented towards the larger goal of improving and promoting organic systems.

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What is your background and current role in organic certification and standards development?

Michel Saumur:

I started working on establishing an organic regime in Canada in 2003. We developed the regulation itself, and also worked on the standard and had to establish the administration of the regime – assessments, audits, verifications and inspections.

First of all, I'm a scientist – an agrologist. I have worked in government for thirty years as a project manager. We learnt by doing, from the stakeholders and from international partners – particularly the NOP and EU. Our role as a government agency is not to be experts in organic production, but to ascertain that the regulations are complied with as written. We don't need to be experts in organic agriculture, but experts in enforcement.

Bill Wolf:

I began as an organic farming inputs developer, and later analysed the different accepted materials lists used by the various certifiers. I was the founding President of OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute). The basic criterion that should be applied to any farm input is 'what materials are kind to earthworms?' We currently assist and advise hundreds of growers, processors and input suppliers on organic regulations.

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What progress or accomplishments in the past five years do you consider most important with respect to organic policy?

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Michel Saumur:

In 2009 the Canadian Organic Office was officially put into place.

Bill Wolf:

The biggest sign of progress was when the NOP improved the public transparent process with guidance documents that provide more clarity about the 'fuzzy edges' of the regulations. It is also possible to offer public comment on these guidance documents, which provides greater accountability.

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What do you see as the most pressing issues or challenges facing the organic community now?

Michel Saumur:

Any time you set up a regulatory regime, like we did in 2009, there are many challenges: consistency in delivery, monitoring, enforcement – these are common to any regulatory regime. If you look at the Canadian Organic Regime objectives you can identify some challenges. The real purpose of this programme is to protect consumers against misleading and deceptive labelling practices. The challenge is developing policies to protect consumers against claims that people want to put around the word 'organic'. There are other words that consumers interpret as meaning the same thing – for example, the word 'natural'. Natural has nothing whatever to do with organic.

Marketers and people who work in publicity are very imaginative – they use all kinds of claims to differenti-

ate their products. Another challenge is to eliminate words that are added to 'organic'. In Canada you can't use 'certified organic' because all organic products are certified. We also don't allow claims of '100% organic', 'beyond organic', and similar terms. We are seeing fewer of these misleading terms as a result of making it simple and clear to consumers.

Internationally, organic is becoming more and more popular – so at the same time if we want market access we have to have a system strong enough to be recognised internationally. In Canada 80% of organic products are imported, so we have to make sure that imported products meet our requirements. Demand is growing, so we have the challenge of how to get farmers to produce more.

We don't collect statistics on numbers of organic producers, crops or acreage in Canada – our numbers come from stakeholders. We estimate that about 2-5% of farms in Canada are organic.

Bill Wolf:

I see three key challenges for the immediate future. First, the organic community has to return to respectful dialogue, rather than an adversarial mode in which people are threatened and personally attacked for offering their opinions.

Second, we have to find ways to reduce the burden of the certification process and bureaucracy on small farmers – many, including some of the early pioneers – are dropping out of certification. The process has been 'dumbed down' to an overwhelming level – producers are repeatedly being asked the same questions. We need to figure out what are the important questions to ask. The record keeping process is very burdensome for a small farmer.

Third, it is important to simplify the materials review process. People who are involved in reviewing the standards have a conflict between not wanting anything more on the National List and what encourages good practices. The focus on limiting the number of allowed synthetics also limits the possibility of innovation and creative development of new alternatives.

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In the next five years, what do you see as the most important changes that must be made or actions that must be taken to meet these challenges? What are you (or your organisation) doing to address these issues?

Michel Saumur:

We have a proposed project to develop an organic management information system to gather statistics about this sector – organic acreage, management systems, imports and exports, sales, and similar information. Other than this we will continue to work on monitoring and enforcement activities to support the regulatory regime. The Canadian Organic Regime is part of Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is charged with enforcement.

As part of our process we created a standard interpretation committee that works closely with certifying bodies to address questions of interpretation of standards and how to certify to ensure consistency. Inspector training is a high priority.

Another priority is to continue discussions with other countries to harmonise as much as possible – personally I think harmonisation will come naturally as we continue to engage in these discussions.

The biggest challenge for the sector itself is to increase production.

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Looking farther ahead, what do you envision as the future of organic certification and standards in the context of the North American and global food system? For instance, will there be increased harmonisation and reciprocity between countries and regions? Will government policies more actively support certified organic production? Will organic standards evolve to address broader sustainability goals?

Michel Saumur:

Organic standards can be flexible and can be modified, but at the same time there are very strong principles. The organic sector in Canada is responsible for the standards – it is up to them to develop their standards to be consistent with their principles. There is pressure sometimes to dilute the standards. You have to maintain a fine balance between strong principles and harmonisation.

The major difference between the US and Canada is that here standards are separate from the regulation. The standard is developed and maintained by the organic sector. The government's role is to maintain the standards and identify any discrepancies between what they want to put in the standard and other regulations – for example, organic animals cannot be exempted from other animal health

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NATIONAL ORGANIC TEXTILE STANDARDS IN INDIA

The National Organic Textile Standards (NOTS) has been set up by the Indian organic authority APEDA (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority). The purpose of the standard is to respond to the increasing demand on organic textiles and to benefit local producers and the environment.

APEDA has declared that the launching of NOTS makes India the only country in the world to have introduced organic textile standards at the national level.

On the other hand, the international working group on Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) expressed its concerns that the mandatory governmental organic textile processing standard may place additional financial and administrative burden on GOTS-certified Indian textile producers. But it also pointed out that the details of the standard and certification requirements have not yet been outlined. India is the country with the biggest number of GOTS-certified facilities. ■

Source: Just-style: www.just-style.com/news/introduces-national-organic-textile-standards_id115068.aspx

regulations. Our role is also to facilitate the discussions and help develop consensus. We also help by looking at standards in other countries and bringing things to Canada's technical committee that are not addressed here, such as bananas.

Bill Wolf:

We need to reconnect soil quality with crop and animal health – connect the quality of what we're producing to the certification process. We spend too much time proving what we don't do rather than showing what we should be doing.

The most exciting uncharted territory for organics is to reconnect soil quality and nutrient density. Consumers are persuaded to buy organic because they can taste the difference in quality, and we need to link back quality to the certification process¹.

What would it take to accomplish that? We need to have a real organic system plan – not just a check box saying you are following the rules. It doesn't have to be complicated, but should address your plan to manage the system for continuous improvement. This concept is already present in the NOP requirement that all practices must maintain or improve soil and water quality, but has been overshadowed by excessive detail about specific practices used to achieve that outcome.

Consumers are eventually the ones who will create that pressure – the quality of what's sold at retail has to verify the value – such as nutrient density, taste. A Brix meter (an instrument used to measure sugar content) is a simple tool that can be used to demonstrate product quality. There are other indicators that can be used. Nutrient density certification would help organics, and is one of the most important trends.

How do we address the local versus organic issue? It has to be both – producers who sell strictly locally don't really need certification, because their markets are based on personal trust. But it creates animosity towards the organic concept when the obstacles to certification are too high – it comes back to overly burdensome requirements for small producers. ■

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Footnotes:

¹ This is reflected in the recent FAO publication, *Sustainable Diets and Biodiversity*, which calls for 'immediate action to promote sustainable diets and food biodiversity so as to improve the health of humans and of the planet'. See www.fao.org/news/story/item/153694/icode/.

More Information:

CFIA, Canada Organic Office: www.inspection.gc.ca/food/organic-products/eng/1300139461200/1300140373901
Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates: <http://www.organicsspecialists.com/>



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