

Transitions

THOUGHTS ON ORGANIC FOOD & FARMING

by Steve Sprinkel

Throughout the spring and early summer I had been trading e-mails with a small group working in the organic sector — farmers, a certifier, specialists, marketers — who were asking questions about questionable organic product grown and processed in China.

Last April we received a call from Paula Lavigne, a writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, who was writing a story on organic imports from China and wanted to talk to my friend Eric Kindberg. We were not surprised that the mainstream press had gotten wind of our problem, and not too startled when the *San Francisco Chronicle* called a few weeks later, also asking for info on China organics.

By chance, Kindberg was visiting us when Paula Lavigne called. Kindberg has been living in China for the past few years, doing some farming, learning about China, and teaching the Chinese about organic production standards and certification. Lavigne began her investigation with Kindberg's help and that of others, while other parties were contacted regarding the situation, including Chinese officials and organic certification agencies such as the Organic Crop Improvement Association.

Even after Lavigne's article was published, no one to my knowledge except Cecilia Bowman (Indiana Certified Organic) had approached the USDA to see if they recognized the magnitude of the situation. To be honest, no one really understands yet the scope of the potential problem — but too many people have severe doubt for us to ignore the probability that little organic farms on California's Santa Cruz coast are getting a whole lot more scrutiny than the Chinese Army, which, as we have learned, is the largest agricultural operation in the world. The implicit power and opportunity for extraordinary regulatory leverage is obvious. Coupled with the USDA's apprenticeship-level management of organic trade, China's incredible growth in the sector and their inexperience in regulating this novel agricultural system should provoke some serious review.

Ample and common evidence suggests that caution is advised. When Wal-Mart started banging the organic drum earlier this year, everybody wanted to know

where the retail giant and the crowd of "me-toos" were going to come up with all of this organic product. One of the most obvious new sources is China. Not in the sense of 24-count boxes of bunched beets from Guangzhuo showing up in San Pedro and Houston, but major agribusiness food corporations will be able to outsource raw product for frozen and processed retail goods.

Certifying this flood of product has stressed our system and stretched our credibility.

Product was scarce enough without even more trucks to load. Without the megas involved in the fresh produce deal, prices have doubled and tripled this season, and wholesale prices on only a few products have started to come back to earth. California organic tomatoes are still \$54 a box at the beginning of August — and for most of the season if you had any organic cucumbers at all there was amazing money in them. So, the notion that organic would be made available to the masses via the Big Box seemed to lack some business basics, unless the motive was not to *provide* organic product, but to merely *promise* it.

Certifying this flood of product has stressed our system and stretched our credibility. There is not much reason to believe that an under-funded, thinly staffed and not-well-seasoned outfit like the National Organic Program is up to speed on accreditation. Going back over the history of the process, what stands out is USDA's concern to accredit as many applicants as possible as quickly as possible, *en masse*. USDA's motive at the time was not to give any certifier an unfair advantage — so they put consumers and people involved in this game for 30 years at a disadvantage. At the time — 1999-2000 — there had been enough complaints and rumors about the known certification agencies for USDA to have warranted slow, careful accreditation to newcomers. Instead we had an untrained agency granting approvals to novices.

Accreditation is the government's main statutory obligation, but it was not one of

the most noteworthy aspects of the journey taken by the organic community to establish a system to facilitate organic trade and safeguard the interests of consumers. Many people in the community are more conversant in the nuances of Chilean nitrate than in how accreditation is accomplished and what the protocols are.

The key failures of the system noted in Lavigne's *Dallas Morning News* article dealt with inadequate inspection and unfamiliarity with compliant practices. The greater issue is that certifiers who are woefully behind in their internal protocols continue to allow product to be imported from farms and handlers they have not reviewed. In terms of ethics, we now understand that our system is not easily transferred or adapted to other countries' methods and social customs.

While Lavigne was investigating her story, we all fretted over the potential devastation to organic farmers, particularly when the potential scandal reached consumers. But in the intervening weeks nobody seems to have picked up on it.

Instead, when Lavigne asked Barbara Robinson, who oversees the NOP, to comment, Robinson came off sounding like Donald Rumsfeld: "I don't think there are any absolutes in the world anywhere. I think that's kind of a ridiculous question."

In other words, "You go out to certify product and accredit certifiers with the agency you have, and if things go wrong, well, too bad."

This story is bound to blow eventually, and in the end everyone will be covered in the shame of it unless we realize that our long-term self-interest is at risk.

Ultimately, the NOP seems to have attempted more than it should have in allowing broad accreditation before its own internal process had matured. The NOP has had too many administrators who did not serve long enough, almost never coming from the private sector (or state certi-

fication agencies) where the experience resides.

We have researched and reread an abundance of materials in order to become reacquainted with accreditation. The stakes make it a rewarding task — not that we can claim much expertise. One salient issue is the disconnect between the accreditation of domestic certifiers and the nonaccreditation of their international branches. And we still are uncertain as to USDA's position. The only other accreditation body in this field is the International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS), which was developed over ten years ago to provide contract services to the International Federation of Organic Farming Movements (IFOAM).

Some years ago, IFOAM was the only accreditation agency operating, but they foresaw that eventually their educational and promotional work would be viewed as a conflict of interest if they were also accrediting certifiers to work in countries where they had people in the field teaching organic farming.

Consider this tangled web: IOAS accredits four certifiers to work in China, for example, including OCIA International, ICS-FVO and the Chinese domestic certifier OFDCC, but only one, the Japan Organic and Natural Foods Association, is accredited to perform work according to USDA/NOP standards. Discrepancies arise in what the NOP recognizes versus what IOAS recognizes. Organic Crop Im-

provement Association is accredited by the USDA, but according to IOAS, the OCIA International is not. International Certification Services (a division of Farm Verified Organic, FVO) is not accredited by the USDA according to IOAS, but FVO is.

When one considers the huge tonnage of dry edible beans and livestock feed arriving from China as "certified organic" when the NOP does not recognize those certifiers as competent to work in China, it is obvious that we at best have an immature system rife with on-the-job training posing as comprehensive quality control. With plans to produce more on a grand scale, anyone involved with such programs needs to take a hard look at verifiability.

With the coming entry of many retailers into a more mainstream approach towards organic foods, many have questioned where these products are going to be produced. Who is going to be monitoring the production standards of these products?

The unfortunate and inescapable reality is that we have grown too large too quickly, and neither our government nor the leadership within the organic community can certify that *everything* on the retail shelf conforms to organic standards. The framework is in place to perform quality control in other nations, but we cannot paper over the fact that important protocols and even

ACRES^{USA}
THE VOICE OF ECO-AGRICULTURE

Acres U.S.A. is the national journal of sustainable agriculture, standing virtually alone with a real track record — over 35 years of continuous publication. Each issue is packed full of information eco-consultants regularly charge top dollar for. You'll be kept up-to-date on all of the news that affects agriculture — regulations, discoveries, research updates, organic certification issues, and more.

To subscribe, call

1-800-355-5313

(toll-free in the U.S. & Canada)

512-892-4400 / fax 512-892-4448

P.O. Box 91299 / Austin, TX 78709

info@acresusa.com

Or subscribe online at:

www.acresusa.com

the most basic customs check-offs are being ignored.

Steve Sprinkel is a certified organic farmer and organic industry consultant in Ojai, California. He can be reached through e-mail at farmerand-cook@earthlink.net.