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## **Guest Column: Why I trust USDA Organic above all others**

QAI chief says recent headlines focused on 'relatively small percentage of imported organic products'

In the last few weeks, headlines have declared “the organic label is meaningless” and organic imports are “bogus.” While these criticisms are focused on imported products, which make up just four percent of the U.S. organic market, I fear many consumers will read these headlines and question the value and integrity of all certified organic products...maybe even the USDA Organic seal itself.

Yes, the organic sector is grappling with complex issues – from an organic industry association suing the USDA and the head of the NOP stepping down to the USDA inspector general’s report on organic import controls – but the USDA’s National Organic Program (NOP) is still the most highly regulated and transparent food certification in the world.

### **Rigorous requirements and explosive growth**

As a former organic inspector and past chair of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), I understand how rigorous the organic certification process is and how meaningful that USDA Organic seal should be. I’ve trudged through muddy pastures to verify the ID tags of wandering cattle. I’ve pulled random samples from truckloads of organic beets and sent them off for residual pesticide tests. I’ve shivered through lengthy inspections of organic frozen vegetable processing plants. I’ve pored over shipping documents, invoices and inventory control records to trace

products back through the supply chain. I've even debated the finer points of the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) and advised the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture on organic issues.

With all of this experience, I'm not at all surprised that elements of the NOP need to be updated. The organic market has grown tremendously in size and complexity in the last 15 years. We are facing issues and challenges today that none of us could have anticipated when the NOP regulations were written in 2001.

Today, more and more people want to know where their food comes from, and that leads to a heightened level of interest and scrutiny placed on certification programs like the USDA Organic program. There has been a lot of public comment on the organic rules and regulations in recent years, and I see that as a positive development. The challenge we are facing today is addressing a fast-changing market and shifting consumer demands in a regulatory environment that moves very slowly.

### **None of us should be surprised**

The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) is the federal legislation that governs the creation, oversight and enforcement of the USDA's NOP. Prior to the passing and implementation of OFPA, individual U.S. states had the responsibility for establishing their own organic standards, with significant differences from state to state. While some might argue moving to a federal program was a mistake, I believe having a consistent set of regulations that applied not only across the entire United States, but also as a gold-standard around the world, is the primary reason the organic market has seen explosive growth in the last 15 years.

When OFPA was written, the authors understood the regulations would need to be expanded as the industry grew and changed. For instance, the establishment of the NOSB, which consists of 15 volunteer members of the organic community who represent a wide range of stakeholders, was intended to provide a vehicle for transparency and public interaction. The NOSB was created to allow for "continuous improvement," a basic tenet of organic production. However, it was impossible for the authors of OFPA to anticipate the explosive growth of consumer demand for organic products. The NOP and the organic community are experiencing the inevitable growing pains of a successfully developing marketplace.

### **96% of U.S. organics produced in America**

The growth in the organic market has come with new challenges. U.S. demand continues to outpace domestic supply, and producers and processors have turned to imports to meet consumer demand. According to the Organic Trade Association (OTA), annual U.S. sales of organic products topped \$47 billion in 2016, with fruits and vegetables making up the largest

percentage of sales. As mentioned previously, imports account for just 4 percent of that \$47 billion U.S. organic market. Despite this fact, recent headlines have focused on this relatively small percentage of imported organic products.

All of us in the organic industry recognize the danger of fraudulent organic goods reaching the marketplace. Organic certifiers are diligently working in conjunction with the NOP and the OTA to identify improvements in the process that will help ensure the integrity of these imports. No one would deny that critical control points in the organic supply chain need improvement, but consumers can still have confidence that the USDA Organic seal on a product means it has gone through vigorous oversight of both the organic ingredients and the processes used to make the product.

Organic producers and processors go to incredible lengths and submit themselves to deep scrutiny to provide USDA Organic certified products to consumers. Organic certifiers and inspectors work tirelessly in challenging conditions with little recognition to ensure the integrity of the organic marketplace.

While the recent headlines are alarming and the organic import process is not perfect, the USDA Organic program is by far the most highly scrutinized, transparent food system in the world. As an organic consumer myself, I still trust the USDA Organic label above all others.

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