

Symbolic Gardens, New Faces

Do changes at USDA signal a willingness to challenge agribusiness?

BY MARK KASTEL

The state of the (organic) nation is not good—especially for dairy farmers. That shouldn't be too much of a surprise since the entire economy is hurting.

The premium price received for organic commodities has, historically, been a lifesaver for the more than 10,000 family farms now in organics. And co-op members can rightfully take great pride in contributing to what has been accomplished.

But in 2009, the entire organic industry is navigating in uncharted waters. We are experiencing the first protracted economic recession since organics was commercialized, and the landscape is shifting.

According to AC Nielsen, 56 percent of consumers are eating more meals at home. Because organic food is still under-represented in foodservice (restaurants and institutions), a shift toward more home-cooked meals is a positive trend for the industry. Co-ops from around the country report that members are asking for help on meal planning—a development that certainly creates opportunities for communications and marketing.

However, a disturbing trend is a shift away from name brands to more private-label organic products. These “anonymous” products are often divorced from what consumers think they are supporting when they buy organic food (e.g., sourced from factory farms, China, etc.).

Washington report

“Change” was the message that President Obama ran on last year. It's something that is badly needed at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Dubbed the “People's Department” by Abraham Lincoln, whose administration created the agency, it has become a captive of powerful corporate agribusiness interests and an enabler of an industrial-scale farm production model that's been squeezing family farmers out of business for the last half-century. This has resulted in what nutritionist Bernard Jensen called an “empty harvest.” There's been an attrition of nutrition in our food along with the loss of ecologically sustainable and diverse family farmers.

Although more and more co-ops and

consumers are making connections with local farmers, we still need to buy a fair percentage of our (organic) food supply through normal commercial channels. For those who care about the integrity of organic food and farming, the USDA's management of the National Organic Program (NOP) has been an abomination. It's not just mismanagement—the track record has been one of intentional monkey-wrenching of the department's oversight of the industry. This includes ignoring or watering down enforcement actions, failing to ensure that the nation's organic certifying agencies are properly performing their jobs with competent staff, and not providing sufficient resources for the review and evaluation of specific materials and ingredients used in organic food and agriculture.

Just as with the conventional food production system, this has resulted in a shift to factory farm production and cheap imports, predominantly from China.

It's an extremely unfortunate situation because the overwhelming majority of domestic family farmers engaged in organic agriculture are practicing it with ethics and integrity, meeting the expectations of consumers.

And consumer interest in organic food is surging, with sales up—even during the beginning of the recession—more than 15 percent in 2008 and totaling over \$23 billion. But some serious pruning of the organic sector is needed to weed out scofflaws, industrial-scale livestock facilities and others interested in shortchanging organic standards.

Is Obama bringing the mantle of change to the USDA? Make no mistake about it, Michelle Obama's White House vegetable garden, and a certified organic garden planted by the Secretary of Agriculture at its headquarters are meant to be strongly symbolic. (Those of us who are old enough can't help remembering that the first thing President Ronald Reagan did was to rip the solar collectors off the White House roof.)

New management at USDA

It's been a slow slog filling out the raft of political appointees who will direct the agency. But here's a quick look at who's been appointed:

Former Iowa Governor **Tom Vilsack** was tapped to lead the USDA. Vilsack has a reputation as a

pragmatist and seasoned politician. During his tenure as governor, he helped Iowa become an early state leader, investing in an organic program at their Department of Agriculture. Iowa's land grant university also began addressing the needs of organic farmers. But his administration also supported expanded genetic engineering and had close ties to corporate agribusiness.

Vilsack has also expressed interest in confronting the obesity epidemic in this country, which implies addressing the quality of food children and adults eat. Less well known has been his pushing biotechnology and the use of genetically engineered crops as a solution to hunger in Africa and other parts of the world.

Vilsack has made several key appointments since his confirmation in January. The number-two slot in the agency, the deputy secretary, widely viewed as the chief operating officer at the USDA, was given to Dr. **Kathleen Merrigan**, a strong advocate for organics. Merrigan was most recently an assistant professor at Tufts University and director of its Agriculture, Food, and Environment program inside the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

As a staffer for Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), Merrigan helped write the Organic Foods Production Act, the 1990 federal law establishing the nation's organic program. She was later hired by the USDA as a consultant to finalize the drafting of the organic regulations earlier this decade. She was on the list of the “Sustainable Dozen,” a group of people viewed by sustainable, local, and organic food supporters as potential high-quality USDA leaders. A petition circulated by Food Democracy Now garnered nearly 100,000 signatures for the roster of possible appointees.

Merrigan intimately understands organics and is aware of many of the problems facing USDA's management of organics. She spoke in May at the semiannual meeting of the National Organic Standards Board, indicating that she was interested in more enforcement activities



Vilsack

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Merrigan

by the NOP. She also emphasized that a full-time program manager was needed at the NOP, which is currently lacking. Her remarks were warmly received. Merrigan was also quick to point out that her job at the USDA, with its 100,000 employees, is far broader than just organics. All in all, her appointment marks an auspicious beginning to our having a relationship with a senior official at the Department.

Sniping at Merrigan and Vilsack for even expressing interest in organics has already begun. Within the last few months, at least three powerful Republican senators have challenged and questioned agency direction pertaining to its traditional support for conventional agriculture, attempting to use organics as a wedge issue to discredit the new administration in the eyes of farmers.

Another key appointment at the USDA is **Edward Avalos** as undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs. Avalos, who is from New Mexico, grew up on a family farm that raised cotton, wheat, and specialty crops. For the past 29 years, he has worked at the state's Department of Agriculture. Cornucopia's sources, who have worked closely with Avalo in New Mexico, speak highly of him and describe him as someone who is fastidious and will look at all sides of an issue.

The Avalos appointment is important because he, as undersecretary, oversees the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), the arm of the agency where the NOP is housed.

And the AMS is scheduled to have a new director as well. In early May, the appointment of **Rayne Pegg** as AMS director was announced. From California, Pegg has been working for the California Department of Food and Agriculture as its deputy secretary of legislation and policy. She has also been heavily involved with the state's Farm Bureau chapter. Pegg's family was connected with agricultural cooperatives. Cornucopia is told by its California allies that Pegg is direct, blunt, and bright, and sees herself as a problem solver.

One particularly troublesome issue surrounding Pegg was her involvement with the "Leafy Greens" regulations that were put into place in California following the spinach *E. coli* outbreak in September 2006. She was a principal in the creating of the regulations. A huge downside of the rules has been the destruction of wildlife habitat and buffers on farms in an attempt to sterilize the surrounding environment. The regulations have also unfairly burdened small farmers growing a diverse number of fresh food crops for local markets with costly food safety testing requirements. We have been told that she now understands that there are unintended downsides to the new regulations.

Food safety

Food safety is an issue gathering enormous attention and will likely lead to legislation reforming FDA (and perhaps USDA) responsibilities later this year. The California Leafy Greens approach is being touted as a potential national model and could seriously injure organic and local producers of high-quality foods. These farmers are part of our nation's food safety solution—not part of the problem. This will be an issue to watch closely.

Many dedicated co-op community members have received ominous emails warning that legislation on food safety moving through Congress, specifically HR 875, could put local and organic farmers out of business, even ban home gardens. While we believe these allegations are untrue, careful analysis by The Cornucopia Institute of pending legislation leaves us with two important conclusions. One, the nation's corporate agribusinesses are out of control and we obviously need our government to provide strict oversight. Two, as a community, we need to be on guard so that new regulations, which are needed for industrial-scale farming, do not place the true heroes in agriculture—local family farmers—at a competitive disadvantage.

National Animal Identification System (NAIS)

The USDA has taken their show and tell about NAIS on the road, visiting farm communities around the country. The recent release of their cost analysis, on initial review, appears to be wholly inadequate in addressing disproportionately higher costs that smaller, direct livestock marketers would face. Stay tuned. ■

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