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BEYOND ORGANIC: DEFINING ALTERNATIVES TO USDA CERTIFIED ORGANIC

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BEYOND ORGANIC:
DEFINING ALTERNATIVES TO USDA CERTIFIED ORGANIC

by

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Since the inception of the National Organic Program (NOP) housed within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the substantial growth of the organic food market has garnered both enthusiasm and criticism. While large farm operations and food companies boast a significant reduction in the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers as a result of more crop land being converted to organic production, small-scale organic farmers are feeling the financial pinch as industry takes over the once niche market. The USDA has received much criticism for defining organic in a way that appears to favor special interests, including industrial-size organic operations, as imposed standards are highly technical, scientific, and focus considerably on what substances, both synthetic and non-synthetic, may be used in organic food production, handling, and processing. Unable to compete with the dominant big organic growers, small-scale organic farmers are recognizing the USDA’s narrow definition of organic in comparison to the many meanings the movement once espoused. They promote eating, local, sustainably-grown food as an alternative to industrial organics.

A review of the history of the organic food movement in the U.S. from Rodale to USDA codification is included. Major criticisms are delineated and discussed. Literature on definitional disputes is applied to these criticisms and utilized to interpret the response to the USDA codification of organic on the local level. Example responses from Western Montana are discussed. Finally, a “Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet” is developed based on the research in an effort to promote consumer literacy of organic foods that further contributes to food citizenry and democracy.
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INTRODUCTION

On the cover of the March 12, 2007 issue of TIME the phrase “Forget organic. Eat Local” appears across a giant, shiny, red apple (See Appendix A). The cover story, titled “Eating Better Than Organic,” is journalist John Cloud’s perspective on the “food fight” that has emerged within the organic foods sector. Cloud (2007) writes, “It’s only recently that I had noticed more locally grown products in the supermarket, but when I got home I discovered that the organic-vs.-local debate has become one of the liveliest in the food world.”

Cloud’s article is one of several recent publications that discuss the dissociation of small farmers, who already practice predominantly “organic” farming methods from the definition of “certified organic” as established legislation that is now administered by the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP). Recent books, such as Michael Pollan’s (2006) The Omnivore’s Dilemma and Samuel Fromartz’s (2006) Organic, Inc., discuss in great detail the evolution of organics to its present, mainstream, form, while giving their readers many issues to consider when making their next purchase of organic foods. Articles found in a range of nationally and internationally recognized journals, newsmagazines, and newspapers, both prior to and after the release of Pollan’s and Fromartz’s books, similarly highlight the implications for those who believe many originating principles are absent from the current definition of organic and are being forgotten. With so many publications, readers interested in food issues have plenty to chew on. The ongoing debates about the meaning of organic and possible alternatives to what was once the alternative, such as supporting local, sustainable, small scale agriculture, establishes that the issues to be discussed and addressed in this paper are timely and relevant.
The purpose of this paper is to help consumers make informed buying decisions in the midst of definitional disputes over the meaning of “organic” and the growing alternatives to organic, with particular attention to examples from Western Montana. In order to accomplish this, I propose to do the following:

1) discuss the history of the organic food movement, including how it has come to be defined, its subsequent mainstreaming, and how the definition of organic has resulted in substantial concern and criticism;
2) apply literature on definitional disputes to the current debate over the definition of organic per the USDA as well as the move toward promoting alternatives to certified organic on the local level;
3) use the results of this analysis to produce a consumer food buying packet aimed at informing consumers’ purchasing decisions with regard to organic food.
HISTORY OF ORGANIC FARMING IN THE U.S.: FROM MOVEMENT TO USDA CODIFICATION

Since 1997, the demand for organic foods has increased at a profitable rate. According to research by the *Nutrition Business Journal* on behalf of the *Organic Trade Association* (OTA – a lobbying group for the organic industry), their 2006 Manufacturer’s Survey indicated consumer sales of organic foods reached $13.8 billion in 2005, representing a growth of 16.2% for the industry that year (*Nutrition Business Journal*, 2006). While this figure only accounts for 2.5% of the nearly $557 billion spent on food in the U.S., sales of organic foods have increased at a rate of 15% to 21% each year since 1997 (*Nutrition Business Journal*, 2006). As a point of reference, sales of organic foods in 1997 made up less than one percent (.81%) of total food sales in the U.S. This kind of growth is a strong indicator that demand and sales will continue to increase.

These figures beg the question, how did food defined as organic evolve from a once niche market into such a profitable part of the food economy? The answer is complex and the history of how organic food came to be is long and full of controversy, politics, and redefinition. At this point, a brief overview of the history of the organic food movement in the U.S. from its humble roots to its multibillion dollar industry status of today is warranted.

The first prominent notion of “organic” farming in the U.S. had its roots in the British organic movement of the 1920s through 1940s. During this period concerns regarding emerging food production methods (i.e., industrialization) began cropping up and the pioneers of organic farming developed not only methods but also “an alternative conception of what farming should be” (Fromartz, 2006, p. 7). Sir Albert Howard, a British agriculture scientist prominent during this period, laid the philosophical foundation for the organic
movement and remained influential for his focus on the soil in which food is grown (Pollan, 2006). He postulated that healthy, nutritious food is the result of healthy soil and was among the first to criticize the emergent use of chemicals to supplant vital nutrients lost in dilapidated soil (Fromartz, 2007), though he was preceded by names like Plato and Thomas Jefferson in discussions linking the health of soil to the health of all creatures who depended on it (Pollan, 2006). In his 1940 publication, *An Agricultural Testament*, Howard wrote “The maintenance of soil fertility is the real basis of health and of resistance to disease” (Fromartz, 2006). Sir Albert Howard firmly disagreed with research produced in the late 19th century by German chemist Justus von Liebig who had argued that chemicals could replace the minerals in manure that make it healthy. Rather than adding inputs created in a lab into the soil, Sir Albert Howard sought to work in concert with our natural systems (Fromartz, 2006).

Ultimately, Howard believed that “artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals and finally, men and women” (Pollan, 2006, pg. 148).

The importance of Howard’s notion of soil health and vitality was later echoed in the U.S. by J. I. Rodale. Rodale’s formal training was in accounting, however, he ventured into manufacturing and then publishing. In the 1940s he came upon the work of Sir Albert Howard and quickly converted into a firm believer in what would be called the organic method (Fromartz, 2006). He began experimenting with organic farming techniques, including composting, planting a variety of crops, natural pest and disease suppressants, and generally simply working in harmony with the natural system. By 1942, Rodale began publishing his first magazine with his source of inspiration, Sir Albert Howard, as associate editor (Fromartz, 2006). The magazine was called *Organic Farming* and despite little initial interest from farmers, the magazine lives on today as *Organic Gardening*. It was within
Rodale’s publications that the term “organic” was applied to food and farming for the first time (Pollan, 2006). Prior to that, the term “organic” was prominent among 19th century social critics who contrasted the disintegration of society brought on by the Industrial Revolution to a lost organic society where concern and collaboration still existed (Pollan, 2006). Rodale used his publications as a platform for speaking out against large-scale farming, using chemical fertilizers to accelerate plant growth while speeding up exhaustion, and giving animals vaccinations, tranquilizers, and other medicine (Fromartz, 2006). Before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, Rodale was warning readers about the threat DDT posed in his *Pay Dirt* publication in 1945 (Fromartz, 2006).

The 1960s and 1970s gave rise to a counterculture of hippies and environmentalists, some of whom moved to the countrysides to live in communes. They created food co-ops and substantiated organic farming, while making the term “organic” a part of the everyday vernacular. Rodale’s publications were gaining in popularity, and the rejection of conventional agriculture laden with chemicals made by manufacturers like Dow and Monsanto – who also made napalm and Agent Orange, herbicides used in war in Southeast Asia at the time – became a political statement (Pollan, 2006). The emerging political side of organic sought not only an alternative to food production (through chemical-free farming), but also an alternative to distribution (through co-ops) and consumption through the creation of a “countercuisine” based on eating whole, “brown” foods (e.g., rice, wheat, tamari, etc.) that are not processed by industry (Pollan, 2006). Essentially, “Organic stood for everything industrial was not” (Pollan, 2006, p. 142).

Such a counterculture of organic farmers and co-op organizers was suspect to the U.S. government and was met with much hostility, as many officials criticized organic
farming as backwards and detrimental to our abundant food supply. For example, in 1971 a former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, stated, “We can go back to organic agriculture in this country if we must; we know how to do it. However, before we move in that direction, someone must decide which 50 million of our people will starve” (Nation’s Agriculture, 1971 in Guthman, 2004, p. 110). Butz recognized that what was being termed “organic” was in reality how farming had been practiced until agriculture became largely industrialized, however he juxtaposes that notion with the startling idea that if we went back to that method of farming we could not proliferate as a society; rather, there would be mass famine. In 1974, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) even went so far as to propose eliminating altogether such terms as “natural” and “organic” and successfully prohibited any labels claiming that natural or organic foods were in any way more nutritious or superior to conventionally produced foods (Guthman, 2004). Years later, during the energy crisis of the late 1970s and the succeeding farm crisis of the 1980s, political proponents of conventional agriculture began to recognize the potential benefits of so-called organic farming, as the high cost of petroleum-based inputs became increasingly apparent. But it was the negative connotations the federal government ascribed to the term “organic” that impeded acceptance of the alternative method of farming at the federal level (Guthman, 2004).

Guthman (2004) notes that rather than “organic,” words like “sustainable” (because it was being used in foreign aid circles) and “low-input” (because it responded to the energy crisis) grew widespread acceptance in the political arena in the 1980s. Even though the government attempted to re-name organic farming, “remarkably, though, it is organic agriculture that has become the flagship of sustainable, despite organic agriculture’s deeper
countercultural origins, which some have argued were less politically palatable” (Guthman, 2004, p. 110).

To complicate matters more, during this time many groups of farmers began developing their own organic standards and certification practices. This resulted in the onset of legislation that would begin to legally define the term “organic”. Since the early part of the movement was largely influenced by Rodale, it is not surprising that his cohort was the first to establish an official certification program for organic food. With most of the farmers who followed Rodale’s program farming in California, it promptly transformed into the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) program in 1973. Similar certification programs quickly followed, such as Oregon Tilth, and by the end of 1974, eleven more regionally-based certification organizations had been founded. During the emergence of nascent certification programs, an assortment of definitions for organic farming surfaced. According to Singer and Mason (2006),

Varying definitions spun out of control as different associations of ‘organic farmers’ tried to set standards in accordance with their own values. Some wanted to stick with a narrow definition in terms of what you could or could not put on the soil, the crops, or the animals. Others wanted to include an entire way of life, including healthy living, an equitable form of distribution, concern for wildlife, and so on (p. 198).

Additionally, it was not long before the few existing organic distributors and marketers began pervading organic standards legislation, “having most to gain from clear definitions of organically grown foods” (Guthman, 2004, p. 113). By 1979, those in favor of placing parameters around organic saw the first official piece of legislation with the Organic Foods Acts (OFA) of California. While the act did create a legal definition of organic, the state refused to enforce or oblige any entity to follow their regulations.
In part due to CCOF’s flaccid enforcement of the standards they established in OFA, the 1980s gave way to a rise in the amount counterfeit produce being passed off as organic. Additionally, consumer demand was on the rise as concerns about pesticides captured the attention of the media. For example, the Alar scare of 1989 prompted consumers’ to consider a potentially safer and healthier method of producing food (Fromartz, 2006). Alar is a pesticide that was widely used on apples and becomes a probable carcinogen when apples are heated and processed into such child favorites as apple sauce and juice. CBS aired a report on the pesticide on its show 60 Minutes, which soon after led to what Newsweek called, “A Panic For Organic” (Fromartz, 2006). All of the negative attention the media drew to the pesticide finally prompted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ban the substance the government had already suspected was indeed a carcinogen (Fromartz, 2006).

Such events seemingly necessitated stricter provision over organic food production and culminated in the California Organic Food Act of 1990 (COFA). Again, the California legislation maintained a “baseline definition” of organic and for the first time included penalties for those not in compliance with the rules (Guthman, 2004, p. 113). In the same year, the federal government followed suit with Congress passing the Organic Food Production Act (OFPA) as part of the farm bill. According to the USDA’s website, the OFPA required the [USDA] to develop national standards for organically produced agricultural products to assure consumers that agricultural products marketed as organic meet consistent, uniform standards. The OFPA and the National Organic Program (NOP) regulations require that agricultural products labeled as organic originate from farms or handling operations certified by a State or private entity that has been accredited by USDA. The NOP is a marketing program housed within the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA, 2007, January, NOP Background Information).
In addition, OFPA authorized the creation of an independent National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), consisting of 15 members who are appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture and must be comprised of

- Four individuals who own or operate an organic farming operation;
- Two individuals who own or operate an organic handling operation;
- One individual who owns or operates a retail establishment with significant trade in organic products;
- Three individuals with expertise in areas of environmental protection and resource conservation;
- Three individuals who represent public interest or consumer interest groups;
- One individual with expertise in the field of toxicology, ecology, or biochemistry; and,
- One individual who is a certifying agent as identified under Section 2116 of the FACT [Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade] Act (USDA, 2007, January, NOP Background Information; USDA, 2006, April 28, Reestablishment of the National Organic Standards Board).

Specifically, “The purpose of the NOSB is to assist in the development of standards for substances to be used in organic production and to advise the Secretary on other aspects of the implementation of Title XXI of the FACT Act,” and among its duties “The NOSB shall develop the proposed National List of approved and prohibited substances; or proposed amendments to the National List for submission to the Secretary” (USDA, 2006, April 28, Reestablishment of the National Organic Standards Board). After the OFPA of 1990 was passed, it took the USDA another 12 years of considering the NOSB’s recommendations for organic standards as well as reviewing State, private, and foreign organic certification programs to finalize and implement a definition of organic (Guthman, 2004; Nestle, 2006). This delay is attributed in large part to the conflicts that ensued between the NOSB and the USDA, the federal entity charged with administering the National Organic Program (NOP), and because the USDA still contested many organic principles (Guthman, 2004).
However, by creating a consistent national standard, Congress and the USDA sought to clear up all of the confusion over what constituted as organic as a result of the various certifying programs and prior legislation. Today, the NOP oversees the 97 accredited domestic and international certifying agents to ensure the rules for organic food production are being followed by all growers and producers (USDA, 2007, March 16, *NOP List of Accredited Certifying Agents*).

The following is a summary of the NOP organic standards as described by the USDA NOP website for consumers (USDA, 2002, October, *NOP: Organic Production and Handling Standards*), Nestle (2006, pg. 42) and Singer & Mason (2006, pg. 199):

- land must be free of prohibited substances for a minimum of three years before the harvest of both plants and animals;

- food is grown and produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers;

- crop pests, weeds, and disease should be controlled primarily through management practices including physical, mechanical, and biological controls; when these controls are not sufficient, biological, botanical, or synthetic substances approved for use on the National List may be used;

- soil fertility cannot be maintained with synthetic fertilizers or be derived from sewer sludge and may be maintained through tillage, crop rotation, planting cover crops, and supplemented with animal and plant waste and allowed synthetic materials;

- preference is given to the use of organic seeds and other planting stock, but non-organic seeds and planting stock may be used under specified conditions;

- the use of genetically modified seeds for plants is not permitted and animals cannot be the product of genetic engineering;

- neither seeds nor the food may be treated with irradiation;

- animals used for meat, eggs, and dairy products may only eat grain that is 100% organic, may be given allowed vitamin and mineral supplements, and may be given vaccinations to maintain health; certified organic animals cannot be given antibiotics or growth hormones; a dairy herd may be converted to organic production by
providing 80% organically produced feed for 9 months, followed by 3 months of 100% organically produced feed;

▪ animals must have access to the outdoors, including pasture access for ruminants;

▪ non-agricultural ingredients, both synthetic and non-synthetic, must be approved and on the National List of Allowed Synthetic and Prohibited Non-Synthetic Substances;

▪ handlers of food to be labeled organic must prevent the commingling of organic with non-organic products and protect organic products from contact with prohibited substances;

▪ in processed organic products, all agricultural ingredients must be organically produced, unless the ingredient(s) is not commercially available in organic form;

▪ meticulous records must be kept on all facets of the production process;

▪ the grower/producer/handler must go through the certification process and be inspected annually by a USDA certifying agent

Even this extensive list is merely a summary. As Marion Nestle, author and Professor of Nutrition at New York University, points out in her book, *What to Eat*, “The Organic Standards – the rules about what organic farmers can and cannot use – take up hundreds of pages in the Federal Register and do not make for light reading. Like any rules, they require interpretation” (p.42). For all practical purposes, the rules laid out above are merely a summary of the main rules farmers and producers must follow. These are the rules with which most consumers may be familiar as well as what the USDA and other organizations highlight as the overarching protocol for organic farming and production. While they appear to cover a lot of ground, many pioneers argue that much has been left out of the definition of organic, especially with regard to social and philosophical issues. The vast majority of the USDA organic standards are very technical and scientific, and much energy is spent on determining which synthetic substances may be allowed in organic food production and which non-synthetic substances are prohibited. As noted, determining approval or
disapproval of these substances on the “National List” is the primary function of the NOSB, indicating there is far less focus on the broader, social issues wrapped up in organic agriculture. As of March 21, 2007, the NOSB has reviewed or is in the process of reviewing over 150 substances that have been petitioned for approval since 1999 (USDA, 2007, March 21, Petitioned Substances). Author and professor Julie Guthman (2004) states in her book, Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California,

Yet in popular discourse and within the organic community itself, the justification for organic agriculture continues to involve a multiplicity of ecological, economic, and social concerns that reach beyond the farm gate. Many producers and consumers in the organic movement are critical of the industrialization of farming and food provision…The new agrarianists, motivated by social and economic concerns, invoke the survival of small farms and livable rural communities as a reason for farming organically…Nevertheless, few of these issues were ever addressed in organic standards, as least in the U.S. (p. 117).

Pollan (2006) notes that during the long process to establish the standards and a definition for organic agriculture, “…various forces both within and outside the movement battled for control of a word that had developed a certain magic in the marketplace. Agribusiness fought to define the word as loosely as possible, in part to make it easier for mainstream companies to get into organic” (p. 154). By “loosely” defined, it is plausible that Pollan is referring again to the many principles that were left out of the definition that, if included, would have made it very difficult for large scale, monocrop farms to be granted organic certification.

What was not included in the definition, the necessity for interpretation, and the increasing involvement of agribusiness in defining organic has led and will continue to lead to many disputes within the organic foods sector. Examples of such disputes and the criticisms of what has become of the organic foods movement, will be discussed in a later section of this paper.
In addition to establishing a federal definition of organic, in 2002 the USDA also created an official seal by which consumers can clearly identify a product that is USDA certified “100% organic” (100% of the ingredients are organic) or “organic” (95% to 100% of the ingredients are organic) (see Figure 1). The USDA seal, its meaning nebulous for organic pioneers, does communicate that the grower/producer has been inspected by an USDA accredited certifying agent who has verified growing and producing methods are in accordance with the Organic Standards, and inspectors should, in theory, hold all producers to the same standards set forth by the NOP (Nestle, 2006). Displaying the seal is optional; however, it can now be found in just about any type of store, from convenience to warehouse, and on any kind of product, from chocolate bars to coffee. The use of a single, uniform seal can ease confusion among consumers in that they now need only look for the one authoritative label. The standardization of organics via federal definition with its uniform seal has ultimately led to its industrialization, which has catapulted the once niche market from locally owned co-ops to supermarket chains. However, even prior to the release of the USDA Certified Organic standards, the late 1990s saw organic food companies such as Cascadian Farms being bought up by large mainstream food companies, and with that, it became apparent that the organic foods sector was losing touch with its anti-industrial roots (Fromartz, 2006).
ORGANIC MOVES TO MAINSTREAM

Today, consumers seeking alternatives to conventionally grown food no longer have to seek out specialty health food stores and co-ops to get their organic fix. Organic foods are now widely available at “mainstream” grocery stores, about three in every four (Singer & Mason, 2006). In fact, the OTA’s 2006 Manufacturer’s Survey results show that 2005 organic food sales at independent natural food stores fell below 25% (Nutrition Business Journal, 2006). Coupled with the “natural” food grocery chains such as Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats, sales from the “natural channel” only represented 47% of all organic food sales. What is more, 46% of the total organic food dollars were spent through “mass-market” channels, which include traditional supermarkets/grocery stores, mass merchandisers, and club stores (Nutrition Business Journal, 2006). These data are a strong indicator that organic food is now more widely available than ever before. Many large food companies and supermarket chains have recognized just how lucrative the organic business is if not for the sheer fact that consumers have traditionally been willing to pay a premium for organic foods (Nestle, 2006).

In Missoula, for example, grocery store chains offering organic choices include Safeway and Albertsons. Safeway is one among many major grocers that features its own private label organic food line called “O” (“Organics”). Typically, the store brand organic products, or as this researcher likes to call them, the “generic organics,” are less expensive than the popular organic brands consumers have come to recognize, like Muir Glenn, Woodstock Farms, and Cascadian Farms (Warner, 2006). Interestingly, some items, such as their USDA Certified Organic milk, are perpetually on sale, making their “O” milk look like
a bargain when compared to its “mainstream” organic neighbor, Horizon and Organic Valley. (See Appendix B for a chart depicting organic industry private label brands.)

Again, the emergence and subsequent success of natural food stores such as Whole Foods Market (WFM), the natural foods retail leader in the U.S., exemplifies the mainstreaming of organic. The first Whole Foods Market opened in Austin, TX in 1980 and has since grown to 193 stores in the U.S., Canada, and Britain. In 2006, WFM reached $5.6 billion in sales (Martin, 2007). Recently WFM’s chief executive John P. Mackey, after experiencing a slight decline in sales that worried investors, announced that they have made plans to merge with Wild Oats and will absorb their 110 stores in 24 states and British Columbia. Wild Oats’ CEO, Gregory Mays, commented the merger is a “perfect marriage” and positions the companies to better compete with such rivals as Trader Joe’s and Wal-Mart. Prior to the standardization of organics by the USDA, it may never have been conceivable that huge retailers such as Wal-Mart would become a threat to the viability of pioneering organic and natural food retailers like WFM. But the lucrative niche organic market has left many food retailers craving a piece of the profits, and it was only a matter of time before the world’s largest retailer would get in on the profiteering.

In 2006, Wal-Mart announced it would dramatically increase its organic offerings in an effort to “democratize organic food, making products affordable for those who are reluctant to pay premiums of 20 to 30 percent” (Warner, 2006). Further, the chief marketing officer for Wal-Mart stated the company plans to sell organic goods at just 10% above the price for conventional equivalents (Whitney, 2007). Some food industry analysts predict that with its 2000 supercenters and lower prices, Wal-Mart could quickly surpass Whole Foods as the lead seller of organic products (Warner, 2006). Unlike Safeway’s own “O” line of
organic food, Wal-Mart is asking food companies to produce organic versions of their most popular products, such as Kellogg’s Rice Krispies and Kraft’s Macaroni and Cheese.

In his book, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan (2006), like many critics, draws much attention to the mainstreaming of the organic movement. He states, “The organic movement, as it was once called, has come a remarkably long way in the last 30 years, to the point where it now looks considerably less like a movement than a big business” (p. 138). The examples presented above clearly demonstrate Pollan’s observations.

Major concerns regarding the fate of the once humble market – the vast expansion of natural food chains like WFS, the emergence of more corporate owned organic products in chain super markets, including store brand labels, and the Czar of retail, Wal-Mart, promising to sell organics at an affordable price – are making that bowl of Campbell’s organic tomato soup difficult to swallow.
CRITICISMS OF “BIG ORGANIC”: WHAT THE USDA DEFINITION LEAVES OUT

After reviewing the origins of the organic food movement, the defining process it has undergone first by local/state agencies and then by the federal government, and its subsequent mainstreaming, this section of the paper will focus on the emergent criticisms of organic foods, many of which stem from what has been left out of the legal definition of organic.

The USDA Definition of Organic Contributes to the Industrialization of Organic Farming

It is this researcher’s observation that the primary criticism of organic farming and processing today can be attributed to how it has been defined. When the USDA was charged with establishing uniform national standards for organic food and farming based on the OFPA of 1990, they were fixing a federal definition of a word that had meant different things to different people, each meaning multi-faceted and subtly unique (Pollan, 2006). And it is well known that anytime government is about to mandate or define anything, the various corporate players, with their strong lobbying powers, will have a say in defining the “industry” on which they depend. Guthman (2004) affirms that the regulation of organic farming and production by federal law intensified the divide between organic-the-movement and organic-the-industry with the movement essentially losing the battle in the end.

Guthman (2004) states,

For those who most vehemently sought a federal law were those engaged in interstate trade, where uniformity of standards is the salient issue, and those who deal with processed food items and livestock…Thus a federal law was of most direct concern to big producers, processors, and interstate distributors, along with the major certification agencies and organic trade organizations that came to represent them. For those who identified with the organic movement, the federal law represented a huge symbolic loss. It effectively asked agencies that had been most hostile to organic farming to confer it legitimacy, and it forced organic farmers to do business with the very agricultural establishment they set out to oppose (p. 116).
Pollan (2006) asserts, “as organic agriculture has grown more successful, finding its way into the supermarket and the embrace of agribusiness, organic farming has increasingly come to resemble the industrial system it originally set out to replace” (p. 151) and “many of the philosophical values embodied in the word organic…did not survive the federal rule making process” (p. 155).


The [USDA] regulations also do nothing to ensure the varied and conflicting ideals that gave rise to the organic movement: of protecting small farms, concentrating on local production, and supporting alternative food networks, social justices, farmworker rights, or even nutritious food. Companies or farmers can evaluate whether to enter the organic market as a business decision, and grow ‘organic’ food to the minimum standards. That is the cost of defining the movement by a set of rules governing production methods (p. 92)

Phil Howard, a former post-doctoral researcher at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California-Santa Cruz, admits there are pros and cons to a federally established definition of organics. He states, “on the one hand, the acreage devoted to organic production, without synthetic pesticides, increases every year to meet the market demand. On the other hand, some of the ideals of the organic movement, which was in a large part a response to industrial agriculture, have fallen by the wayside” (as quoted in Lindsay, 2006).

These observations made by Guthman, Pollan, Fromartz, Howard, and others strengthen the argument that the definition of organic imposed by the federal government increased the involvement of agribusiness which in turn changed the movement into an industry. While many writers on this topic avoid blatantly asserting that the standardization of organics is “bad,” they certainly provide ample evidence as to how politically imposed
definitions have become a problem for some small organic farmers still practicing their “left out” philosophies.

The growing trend of large food companies acquiring once independent organic manufacturers further demonstrates how industrialized the organic foods sector has become. Some examples of this are: General Mills = Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen; Kraft (Philip Morris) = Back to Nature and Boca Foods; Kellogg = Kashi and Morningstar Farms/Natural Touch; Dean Foods (the Nation’s largest dairy producer) = Horizon, White Wave/Silk, and Alta Dena; M & M/Mars = Seeds of Change (Howard, 2006). Further, most of these companies are developing organic versions of their original products, such as Kellogg’s Organic Keebler and Kraft Organic DiGiorno. For a comprehensive overview of who owns what in the organic food industry, please see Appendix C. What is more, the market share for some of the now corporate organic brands is very high. For example, as of 2004, Horizon and White Wave controlled over 60% of the market for organic milk and soymilk, respectively (Howard, 2003/4).

Marion Nestle, prominent nutrition expert and author, has been asked on numerous occasions if she believes the USDA Organic Standards actually stand for something. Nestle (2006) believes they do and trusts that certifying agents take their jobs seriously and that organic farmers are keeping a close eye on each other. Further, fines for violating the regulations can be staggering. However, she does agree there is a constant push from conventional growers to make the switch to organic easier. Nestle (2006) states,

But as for attempts to weaken the rules, think ‘relentless.’ Political appointees at USDA are always looking for loopholes that might favor conventional growers. Just before issuing the Organic Standards, for example, the USDA said it would be fine for farmers to use genetically modified seeds, irradiation, and sewer sludge, and still call their crops organic. After a barrage of 275,000 outraged letters, the agency backed off this particular idea (p. 43).
Nestle’s example offers an excellent transition to another criticism of “Big Organic”: diminished standards.

The USDA Definition of Organic Has Led to Diminished Standards

Many critics of “Big Organic” contend that numerous problems have surfaced as a result of so much corporate involvement. With the federal definition of organics, food corporations can pay lobbyists to influence decision-makers to pass new regulations in their favor. Arguably, this influence can be seen as weakening the standards of what counts as certified organic food. Two issues that continue to receive substantial attention, among many, are 1) the approval of certified organic processed foods with additives and synthetic chemicals for preservation, and 2) industrial-size dairy farms with cows having little to no access to pasture for grazing (Pollan, 2006).

Joan Dye Gussow, a nutritionist who served on the NOSB, questioned whether organic foods should simply “mirror” the current food system or aspire to be natural and whole foods based. In making the case against synthetics, she asked “Can an Organic Twinkie Be Certified” (Pollan, 2006, p. 156). In response to opposition from purists like Gussow, Gene Kahn, who also served on the NOSB from 1992 to 1997, disagreed and suggested that if consumers want an organic Twinkie, then why not provide it: “Organic is not your mother,” he stated (Pollan, 2006, p. 156). Kahn argued in favor of permitting synthetics in organic food as it is necessary to the manufacturing and preservation of processed foods. (It is interesting to note that Gene Kahn was essentially a product of Rodale’s rigid methods of organic farming. In 1971 he started what was then called the New Cascadian Survival and Reclamation Project, “a quasi-communal hippie farm,” that today is known as Cascadian Farm and is owned by General Mills (Pollan, 2006, pg. 144).)
While the original 1990 OFPA standards prohibited the use of synthetics in organic food production, the final standards of 2002 overrode OFPA and created a list of permissible additives and synthetics. Since 2002, some 38 substances, that the industry argues are relatively “harmless” (e.g., ascorbic acid, carbon dioxide, and xanthan gum), have been approved (Warner, 2005). Many purists were outraged that the same substances used in conventional foods were now permitted for used in organically produced food; but no one has taken as much action challenging the decision to include synthetics as Maine organic blueberry farmer, Arthur Harvey (Fromartz, 2006; Pollan, 2006). In 2003, Harvey won a lawsuit against the USDA, arguing that the use of additives and synthetics is strictly prohibited according to the 1990 OFPA. Harvey’s victory forced the agency to revert back to the original rules established under OFPA.

To Harvey’s dismay, however, that was not the end of this particular issue, as “Big Organic” was determined that the rules cater to their needs rather than appease those pioneering ideals that had been included in OFPA. In fall 2005, the OTA lobbied hard to overturn the 2003 ruling and successfully attached a rider to the 2006 Agricultural Appropriations Bill that added language allowing the use of the synthetics again. (Fromartz, 2006; Gogoi, 2006; Pollan, 2006; Warner, 2005; Whitney, 2007). The approved bill went into effect in 2006 despite continued criticism and the unrelenting threat of Harvey, who is seeking again to challenge the Bill on multiple issues (Whitney, 2007). Jim Riddle, who was chairman of the USDA’s NOSB when the Bill was passed, expressed concern over the secretive manner in which the rider was attached. According to Riddle, the rider was attached to the bill after the adjournment of an appropriation’s conference committee so as to avoid debate (Whitney, 2007). Riddle further stated,
We don’t want organic food manufacturers having carte blanche use of the same kind of synthetics that conventional food processors use, especially when it involves things that do not appear on the ingredient panels. I think people choose to buy organic food because they don’t use all those things (Warner 2005).

Joseph Mendelson, legal director at the Center for Food Safety and Brian Baker, research director for the Organic Materials Review Institute agree the passage of such legislation could open the door to more synthetics that are not considered so “harmless” (Whitney, 2007; Warner, 2005). Mendelson worries food contact substances – boiler additives, disinfectants, and lubricants with unpronounceable names that are mostly undetectable in finished products – could be next up for approval (Warner, 2005).

For industrial organic dairy producers such as Horizon and small, family-owned dairy farmers, the debate over the NOP’s rule stating ruminants must have “access to pasture” has intensified in recent years. While access to pasture sounds ideal for grass eating, grazing animals like cows, opponents to the term ask, what constitutes as “access”? There is no specification with regard to how much pasture per animal is required, how often the animal must graze in the pasture, and for how long (Pollan, 2006). Rooted in philosophy that animals be treated humanely as well as OFPA’s rule that animals’ welfare should be taken into account and that farmers should accommodate their “natural-behavior” (in this case, grass eating and pasture grazing cows) (Pollan, 2006), small-scale organic dairy farmers permit their cattle to roam and graze within a large pasture most days of the year, confining them only during lactation, inclement weather, and when one becomes ill. However, as a result of the vague meaning of the rule, industrial organic dairy farmers with upwards of 1,000 cows keep their stock confined to a feed lot for most of their days because of the time it would take to herd such a large number of cows for milking (Pollan, 2006). Some examples of these industrial organic farms include Horizon’s 4,500-head dairy in Idaho and
Aurora Organic Dairy, the organic branch of a conventional dairying corporation, north of Denver that hosts an astounding 5,700 cows. According to Singer and Mason (2006), at these dairy farms,

…most of the cows are kept in pens, outdoors, but at a density far too high to permit grass to grow. They stand on bare earth and are fed on organic grain. They go out to pasture only before they start producing milk and for the brief periods before they give birth to their calves, when they are again not producing milk (p.217).

These organic dairy farms operating on such a massive scale have raised the eyebrows of not only small organic dairy farmers but of advocacy groups as well. The Wisconsin-based non-profit, Cornucopia Institute, has filed a formal complaint with the USDA NOP asking them to investigate Horizon’s and Aurora’s largest dairy farms, arguing that their cows are denied access to pasture the vast majority of their lives (Singer & Mason, 2006). Mark Kastel, a senior policy analyst at Cornucopia, stated to a reporter “a factory farm is a factory farm” and that dairy farms should not qualify as organic because the owners “cram organic feed down the throats of [their] high producing cattle” (Singer & Mason, 2006, p. 218).

The already questionable “access to pasture” rule was further weakened by a provision allowing farmers to restrict access at certain stages of the animal’s life. Some industrial organic dairies have argued that lactation is one such stage when a cow does not have to be allowed access; the USDA has not objected to this action (Pollan, 2006). Industrial size organic farms with 1,000 cows or more supply 25% to 30% of the organic milk sold in the U.S. (Singer & Mason, 2006).

This is just one of many examples that illustrate the ongoing struggle between the small, traditional organic farmer – who believes that ruminants should have access to fresh air, native grasses, and large pastures – versus the big, organic, industrial farmer who is
producing for a large organic milk supplier that will market the milk as one of those organic store brand labels of milk sold for a cheaper price. An affordable gallon of milk at any major grocery store these days comes with an extra cost no consumer will ever see, but the small organic dairy farmer knows all too well what that cost is.

The USDA Definition of Organic Reduces Organic to a Marketing Tool

Large food companies are essentially using the “good news” of organic food – that it is healthier, better for the environment, supports small family farms, etc., – to get in on the potential for large profits. But the question becomes, are they responding to what the consumers are demanding? Or, are they creating this “demand” with their savvy marketing techniques and appealing packaging narratives that have little to do with actual organic principles? Bruce Peterson, head of perishable food at Wal-Mart, was quoted in a New York Times article, “Organic agriculture is just another method of agriculture – not better, not worse. This is like any other merchandising scheme we have, which is providing customers what they want. For those customers looking for an alternative in things like Rice Krispies, we now have an alternative for them” (Warner, 2006). Peterson may have hit the nail on the head – perhaps organic food is just another “merchandising scheme.”

Along the same lines, Pollan (2006) notes that during the 2000 inauguration of the organic program then secretary of agriculture, Dan Glickman took special care to emphasize that organic food is not superior in any way to conventionally grown food. He stated, “The organic label is a marketing tool, it is not a statement about food. Nor is ‘organic’ a value judgment about nutrition or quality” (p. 179). The USDA would essentially be shooting itself in the foot if it ever took the position that organic food is healthier, safer, better for the environment, better for farmers, or better for our local communities. The USDA NOP
website explicitly states, “USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. Organic food differs from conventionally produced food in the way it is grown, handled, and processed” (USDA, 2007, January, NOP: Organic Food Standards and Labels: The Facts). As Guthman (2004) asserts, the USDA’s development of the NOP was market-driven. “The explicit purpose of designing national standards was to give more backbone to the market premium for organically grown foods by giving organic production definitional distinction without having to devote substantial government resources in the form of, say, subsidies” (p.115). In other words, rather than the USDA supporting organic agriculture by subsidizing popular organic crops or funding substantial research, like it does with conventional agriculture, the USDA wanted to rely solely on its “market premium” and the fact that organics pretty much sell themselves (as indicated by consumers’ willingness to pay the higher prices).

Guthman’s observations are telling. It corresponds with the position that representatives from the USDA and Wal-Mart have taken with regard to organics: defining organic affords food companies just another “marketing tool.” While the USDA NOP website does explain, “Organic food differs from conventionally produced food in the way it is grown, handled, and processed,” it cannot go into detail about what those differences are, therefore almost devaluing the organic method. Then again, one could argue the way in which organic has been defined under the auspices of the USDA is devaluing, as many founding principles have been left out of the current definition. Indeed, today’s small organic farmers no longer feel represented by the USDA’s terms.
The USDA Definition of Organic Does Not Serve the Interests of Small Organic Farmers

Corporate involvement, while it will increase the demand for producing organic goods, will likely have no positive impact on small organic family farms because many large retailers’ food supply is centralized. Therefore, they work exclusively with operations that can supply mass volumes of a product (Howard, 2003/4). As a result, industrial organic farms have become the norm, as they are often able to sell their produce to distributors at a lower price by subsidizing it with non-organic crops, squeezing out competition from small scale organic farms that are diversified in what they produce (Fromartz, 2006; Howard, 2003/4; Lindsay, 2006; Pollan, 2006; Warner, 2006; Whitney, 2007). While Pollan (2006) does agree there is potential for environmental benefits, “the industrialization of organic comes at a price. The most obvious is consolidation down on the farm” (p. 162). Further, the disappearance of the once niche market for small farmers like Peter Johnson of Lasqueti Island, British Columbia is worrisome. Johnson stated in an interview,

Before supermarkets began stocking organic produce, it was bought either directly from the growers or from the health food stores. We sold to a couple of them on Vancouver Island. These either no longer exist or don’t carry produce anymore. The chains aren’t interested in buying from small, local, seasonal, producers (as quoted in Lindsay, 2006). Even before Horizon Organic was acquired by Dean Foods, Horizon also was buying up small dairy processing and distributing businesses. Robert Howe of Vermont was a dairy farmer when Horizon bought out the small co-op The Organic Cow of Vermont which paid Howe and others a sustainable wage for their, by industrial standards, small quantities of milk. Shortly after Horizon took over the Organic Cow, Howe received a letter from Horizon explaining there will be a reduction in payment for his milk (Paul, 2003). Howe accepted that price reduction happens and acknowledged that “As they bring more farms on
line, and larger farms, they probably don’t have as much need for my milk” (as quoted in Paul, 2003).

*Organic Valley*, a cooperative of 700 predominantly small organic dairy farms, began struggling when *Wal-Mart* requested a 20% price reduction from their primary supplier of organic milk for three years (Singer & Mason, 2006; Warner, 2005). *Organic Valley* CEO George Simeon stated of the sudden financial strain on his company, “*Wal-Mart* allows you to really build market share, but we’re about our values and being able to sustain our farmers. If a customer wants to stretch us to the point where we’re not able to deliver our mission, then we have to find different markets” (Warner, 2005). *Organic Valley* is the second largest supplier of organic milk in the U.S., and is widely available across the nation. While *Organic Valley* could be viewed in the eyes of organic pioneers as violating organic principles, it is still only owned by its members, the farmers, and democratically run, which is contrary to the hierarchical spirit of corporate owned *Horizon* (Singer & Mason, 2006).

Further, it is alarming when a thriving cooperative of small dairy farmers cannot satisfy the financial needs of *Wal-Mart*. In the end, *Organic Valley* chose to suspend supplying *Wal-Mart* with their milk (Warner, 2005). It seems as though even this successful co-op is being squeezed out by those feedlot dairies discussed in an earlier section.

Then there is the issue of certified organic products imported from around the world. With the rising demand for organic goods as more and more food outlets like *Wal-Mart* enter the scene, small organic farmers in the U.S. are increasingly strained in attempting to meet their needs (Gogoi, 2006; Whitney, 2007). Cummins of OCA notes that *Silk* soy milk is made with organic soybeans imported from China and Brazil and *Cascadian Farms* acquires organic fruits and vegetables from China and Mexico, among other countries (Gogoi, 2006).
Many proponents of reserving the organic term for small-scale farms believe going overseas for organic goods will only dilute the label, as transparency, a pioneering ideal, is lost; “knowing your farmer, visiting his ranch and seeing how the food is grown – gathering any kind of story behind the food – becomes virtually impossible when organics are obtained from overseas” (Whitney, 2007).

*Earthbound* is the classic example of how an industrialized organic farm can drive small farmers out of the organic niche. *Earthbound* has grown from its meager two-and-a-half acres in 1984 in Carmel Valley, California to its current 26,000 acres spread out in California, Arizona, Mexico, Canada, Chile, and New Zealand, and has earned sales upwards of $360 million (Fromartz, 2006). In particular, *Earthbound’s* organic salad mix is ranked as the fourth-largest in the $2.5 billion bagged-salad industry and can be found in three out of four supermarkets. *Earthbound* is the largest organic produce company and the third largest organic food brand behind *Horizon Organic* milk and *Silk* soy milk (Fromartz, 2006).

During an interview regarding *Earthbound’s* organic industrial model, a well-known West Coast organic farming consultant, Bob Cantisano, stated,

> They’re good stewards of the land and the environment, but they’ve also put a lot of organic farmers I know out of business with their marketing practices. They overproduce and sell crops cheap and have been doing that for the last ten years and they’re highly reluctant to recognize it as a problem (as quoted in Fromartz, 2006, p. 140).

It is difficult to deny that putting small farmers out of business is clearly a misfortune. But, the founders of *Earthbound*, Myra and Drew Goodman, argue that due to their large amount of acreage, they have not used the seven million pounds of synthetic fertilizers and 225,759 pounds of chemical pesticides in a year that they would have used had they been farming conventionally (Fromartz, 2006). This is a sound point that has become a kind of poster
child for why organic farming, including on an industrial scale, is ultimately better for the environment. However, as Fromartz (2006) warns,

Clearing small farms out of the organic sector, rather than supporting them, would be ill advised, too, since no one likes a bully pounding away at a founding segment of the movement. Survival-of-the-fittest tactics have led some consumers to question organic food—and could prompt them to look for a new label (p. 254).

Indeed, Fromartz, like so many others referenced, illustrate the central subject of this paper. As a result of the federal definition of organic that has contributed to its corporatization and mainstreaming, many critics agree that it is time to move “beyond organic” by emphasizing such founding principles as quality, labor standards, and local systems of distribution (Pollan, 2006). As consumers begin to question standards and the manner in which organic products are now being grown and processed, advocacy groups and small-scale farmers who have been practicing “organic” methods since well before the USDA finalized a definition of it, are making subtle attempts to challenge the USDA definition.

Guthman (2004, p. 179) believes “the way organic has been codified into a legally enforceable meaning is the basis of the problem” an offers three broad criticisms, summarized:

1.) organic has been defined largely in technical terms and focuses primarily on materials that can and cannot be used; 2.) the capacity necessary to uphold such a definition is great (significant land, pecuniary, and administrative, etc. capacities), therefore there are considerable barriers to producers without such vast capacity to entering certified organic production; consequently this makes widespread changes to our agricultural system very challenging; 3.) the increase in conventional farms converting to organic farming, with their predisposition to intense, monocrop farming techniques and extensive distribution systems still contributes to some of the ecological problems organic farming is supposed to alleviate.
Guthman’s perspective is worth noting as it again reiterates the multitude of issues associated with the codification of the term “organic”.

In the next section of this paper, I will discuss literature on definitional disputes and apply it to the current criticisms associated with the USDA definition of organic. I suggest such an application will afford a rich analysis of the issues. This analysis will then inform the practical outcome of this paper, a consumer tool kit that will assist consumers in making sense of the current struggle to either redefine organic or create an alternative to the word. As long-time organic farmer and writer, Michael Ableman, suggested in an interview, “We may need to give up on the word ‘organic,’ …to be honest, I’m not sure I want the association, because what I’m doing on my farm is not just substituting inputs” (as quoted in Pollan, 2006, p.169).
USDA ORGANIC AS A DEFINITIONAL DISPUTE

Think back to the cover of that March 12th Time Magazine referenced in the introduction of this paper that suggests consumers, “Forget organic. Eat local.” It is clear the word “organic” is losing some of its luster. After all, a popular news magazine telling its readers to “forget organic” and try this other, potentially superior alternative to the former alternative, does not bode well for the organic industry. How is it possible that a movement that was focused on soil fertility, opposed to industrial agriculture, promoted eating whole foods, and supported a local food economy has metamorphosed into a box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese sold on the towering shelves of Wal-Mart Supercenters? Is this what Rodale would have wanted? Guthman (2004) believes Rodale wanted more farmers to jump on the organic bandwagon because that meant increased magazine sales, but again, I ask, is this really what Rodale would have wanted?

Those who carry on the legacy of what Rodale started contend the organic of today has lost touch with the organic of yesteryears. And the countless conversations that have ensued questioning the USDA definition of organic is proof that many meanings have been left out. While some food advocacy groups and farmers fight to restore the meaning of organic by demanding stricter regulations, others are moving on to appropriating new terms that describe what it is they believe in: maintaining healthy soils; supporting their surrounding communities with whole, nutritious, fresh foods; reducing inputs; maintaining transparency between the farmer and the consumer.

In this paper I have discussed the history of the organic movement, from its alternative roots to its transformation into a multibillion dollar industry, I have demonstrated just how mainstream it has become, and I have detailed many serious criticisms of the current
organic industry, in part due to how it has been defined by federal policymakers. In order to help make sense of the criticisms of today’s organic, I suggest both critics and consumers consider the arguments as definitional disputes.

**Definitional Disputes**

Walton (2001), in his discussion of persuasive definitions, acknowledges they are often seen as “potentially confusing but fairly harmless logic-chopping devices used to boost up the plausibility of arguments in intellectual, philosophical discussions” and that “arguments about definitions are often taken to be trivial” (p. 117). However, Walton warns this is a potentially harmful perspective, as he claims “a definition should always be evaluated in light of the purpose it was supposedly put forward to fulfill in a context of a conversation” and “persuasive definitions of terms already defined in science, law, or everyday usage are very often, in a clever and subtle way, deployed to serve the interest of the definer” (p. 117). Inevitably, disputes over the meaning of word will result. When they do, Schiappa (2003) suggests, “it is more productive and ethical to see definitional disputes as a matter of competing interests, while insisting that some interests are better than others. Accordingly, the questions to ask are ‘Whose interests are being served by a particular definition?’ and ‘Do we want to identify those interests?’” (p. 82). Considering the many criticisms associated with the industrialization of organic that many believe is a result of how the USDA has defined it, a discussion about organic as a persuasive definition and the various interests served by the definition is warranted.

With the substantial increase in large agrofood companies saturating the organic food industry, it has become apparent whose interests are likely being served by the USDA definition of organic. It can be argued under the USDA’s definition of organic, companies
that have for decades solely manufactured and marketed goods made with the products of industrial agriculture can efficiently convert their operations to organic production, since, as Guthman asserts, large farms have the necessary capacity to conform to the complex definition instated by the USDA.

When groups like Rodale, CCOF, and eventually the USDA began defining organic standards, the plausibility of the movement losing most of its identity was likely unexpected. However, as Guthman (2004) purports, “In hindsight, it seems inevitable, particularly insofar as the objective was to uphold a market meaning for a particular set of commodities. For, the purpose of definition making was to distinguish organic products in order to sell them, paving the way for business concerns to take priority” (p. 116). Guthman’s assertions coincide with Walton’s and Schiappa’s observations about definitions in that they strategically serve the interests of the definer.

To further expand on the notion that the definition of organic can be classified as a persuasive definition, I return to Walton who suggests they are successful widely because their descriptive meanings are changed to benefit the definer but their emotive meanings remain as they were before they were redefined (as posited by Stevenson, 1994). Descriptive meaning refers to the denotation, the core factual content of a word, and the emotive meaning of a word pertains to its connotation, the feelings or attitudes (negative or positive) the word suggests. Redefining a word like “organic” to merely technical terms, as it has been, has great potential for deception based on the emotive definition of organic that many consumers assign to the term.

According to Aomi (1985, as sited in Walton, 2001, pg. 119), Stevenson’s theory of persuasive definitions included four requirements for effectiveness which I will detail as it
relates to the defining of organic. The first component suggests, “The word being defined has strong emotive connotations.” This is certainly the case with organic, as has been detailed in previous sections of this paper. The founding principles of the organic movement lend the word organic its emotive connotations. Consumers who have paid little, if any, attention to the criticisms that have surfaced over the years and who know little about the USDA standards, perhaps, are at greatest risk of being misled by this process of definition making. Much of organic food packaging and advertisements promote ideals that evoke the emotive meaning of the word: simplicity, purity, naturalness, healthfulness, supporting family farms, fair wages for fair labor, protecting our environment for future generations, high quality, better tasting, and freshness. Pollan (2006) refers to this as “supermarket pastoral”, where the “evocative prose” of the “competing narratives” on organic and natural food packaging elevates the “emotional dimension” of the food (p. 134). However, Pollan argues the organic label, like any other, “is really just an imperfect substitute for direct observation of how a food is produced, a concession to the reality that most people in an industrial society haven’t the time to follow their food back to the farm…” (p. 137). Whether consumers really buy into the ideals promoted on organic food packaging and in advertisements is up for debate. Nevertheless, the “supermarket pastoral” that encourages the emotive meanings cannot be found in the descriptive meaning of organic generated by the USDA.

The second component is “The descriptive meaning of the word is vague and ambiguous enough to be semantically manipulated.” This can be applied to the case of “organic” as many meanings surfaced over the years as a result of its eclectic membership, from Rodale, to the commune residing back-to-landers and agrarians, to the first certifiers
and marketers. As noted, the diversity that once characterized the organic movement allowed for many meanings to emerge and subsequently many certification programs determining what constituted organic; therefore the term was open to semantic manipulation.

“The change of meaning by redefinition is not noticed by naïve listeners” is the third component. While the USDA did release their proposed standards for organic food production to the “public” and over the years the agency has received hundreds of thousands of comments, there are millions of eaters in this country, so it is safe to assert that many listeners are naïve to the many redefinitions that occurred over the decades. Further, consumers who have only recently endorsed organic food with their pocketbooks are likely only familiar with the USDA’s definition of organic that focuses largely on what substances may or may not be used in organic food production. According to a FrameWorks report in the W.K. Kellogg Foundation *Perceptions of the U.S. Food System* publication, a 2004 survey commissioned by *Whole Foods Market* found that of those surveyed, 58% perceive organic foods as better for the environment, 57% believe organic products support small and local farms, 54% perceive organics are better for their health, 42% think organic products are better quality, and 32% think organics taste better (Bostrom, 2005, July). The results of this survey are an indication of the meanings some consumers ascribe to organic. True, organic production can be viewed as better for the environment based on the significant reduction in chemical usage; however, the USDA does not include provisions that support small organic family farms, and they have explicitly stated that the government is not making any health claims regarding organic or insinuating that it is in any way superior to conventionally grown food with regard to quality and taste, for example.
Finally, the fourth component of an effective persuasive definition is, “The emotive meaning of the word remains unaltered.” I suggest this may be true to an extent in the case of organic. However, considering the widespread critical press mainstream organics has received the last few years, the emotive meanings of the word – the very meanings that have imparted organics with their market value – are slowly dissipating as consumers begin to recognize the wide range of products that can be certified. The nationwide movement to go local that has been gaining in popularity in recent years is strongly advocating that eating a diet rich in local food is really the only way to escape the dangers of conventional agriculture and resist corporatized organics. Some local food advocates are even going so far as to call themselves by a special name that succinctly describes their eating habits. The founder of eatlocalchallenge.com, Jen Maiser, for example, calls herself a “localvore”, while others call themselves “localtarians” (Belli, 2007). Truly special foods, as many small, organic farmers would agree, are not just organic anymore, rather they are sustainably grown to feed their local communities. This idea, as it exists in Western Montana, will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Walton (2001) suggests that the agent who redefines the descriptive meaning of a persuasive definition can experience a temporary advantage as the audience continues to attach primarily emotive meanings to the word. “The temporary gain that can be achieved makes the use of persuasive definitions very attractive as a rhetorical tactic, especially where the redefinition can be lodged into legal, government or some form of public acceptance long enough to have the desired effects its advocates need” (p. 131). This can assuredly be applied to the case of organic, as many consumers do not realize that one of the main reasons for fixing the term organic was to increase its market value rather than promote
communication about the broader pioneering principles that comprise the emotive meanings.

As the descriptive meaning of organic changed through various legislative processes, the USDA had the opportunity to use the authority it was granted to manage the NOP and transform the definition of organic into a legal definition that seemingly serves the interests of big business. Guthman (2004) suggests,

Consequently, the right to claim that any product is organically produced became contingent upon compliance with legal definitions, enforced through an unusual configuration of private and state institutions. This codification arose from multiple intentions, but its greatest success was to open markets. As such, the drive for regulatory legislation effectively subsumed much of the organic movement into an organic industry (p. 111, emphasis added)

However, as Walton (2001) warns, long term problems can occur after a temporary advantage. Based on the increasing public skepticism and media attention surrounding organics, the USDA definition is starting to lose its persuasive power. New York Times writer, Marian Burros (2006), in her review of the politics of food for 2006 notes, “the organics movement went mainstream this year” with Wal-Mart’s roll out of more and lower priced organic products. Burros (2006) comments,

But there were signs that organics may have become too successful for their own good. Once welcomed as the savior of the small farmer and the conscientious eater, organic farming has lost some of its luster, dulled by large operators who follow the letter of the law but ignore the larger principles that once characterized the organic movement.

As a result of the USDA defining organic in scientific and technical terms which satisfies the market needs of large food companies, the meaning of the word “organic” is changing for some consumers, as those who once bought anything labeled organic are increasingly relying on new signifiers such as “grass-fed,” “sustainable,” and “local” (Burros, 2006).

Many critics maintain the USDA definition of organic serves the interests of large corporate agriculture, reinforcing Schiappa’s (2003) argument that “all definitions are
political, specifically in two respects: first, definitions always serve particular interests; and
second, the only definitions of consequence are those that have been empowered through
persuasion or coercion” (p. 69). It has been demonstrated how the redefinition of organic
was empowered through persuasion as it meets Stevenson’s four requirements. Even though
establishing a definition and enforceable standards to some seemed practical and necessary to
the future of organic, as Guthman (2004) asserts, the process was highly political:
the imperatives to define standards in ways that protected existing participants but at
the same time were transparent and provided incentives to entry were contradictory. Organically grown needed to be reduced to a technical term so that anyone could
participate, if not necessarily on his or her own terms. So while it may be the case
that organic standard setters never intended to incorporate a substantive critique of
conventional agrofood delivery, politicized decisions were made many times over
that further delimited the social focus of organic agriculture (p. 118).

In a sense, the nascent organic movement was dependent on action from state and
subsequently the federal government to help maintain the integrity of organics. Eventually,
the authority to define organic was handed over to the federal government as the myriad of
certifying agents and growers advocated for uniform national standards that would make
regulating easier for the industry. However, not only did defining organic become a highly
politicized process, resulting in a definition serving particular interests, but the USDA
definition of organic became highly consequential to those who are not in agreement. When
various parties are not in agreement with how a word has been defined, “definitional
ruptures” can occur (Schiappa, 2003). In part, these ruptures may result from contesting the
authority of the entity who had defined the word in question. The following discussion will
build upon Walton and Schiappa and employ Clarke’s (2005) observations about contesting
definitional authority as it relates to the authority to define organic.
Clarke (2005) suggests examining definitional contestation through the concept of authority. “Typically, challenges to definitional authority begin with a disputed definition: persons in whose name an authority figure speaks object to the substance of a definition generated by the figure” (p. 9). The USDA’s authority to define organic was often challenged as proposed legislation clearly served the interests of outside parties with strong influence on the USDA. Shortly after the USDA was charged with administering the NOP with input from the NOSB, the two entities clashed with regard to who should have the primary authority to shape the future of organics. According to Fromartz (2006), officials at the USDA NOP “declared in meetings with the NOSB that the department would ‘lead’ the program, since it had the ‘expertise and experience.’ Board members objected to remaining in a ‘subservient’ advisory capacity, and argued they should have a primary role in regulatory decision making” (p. 198). Clearly, the members of the NOSB did not believe the USDA had the authority or, “expertise” for that matter, to define organics. The battle for authority continued, when, after the NOSB presented the USDA with their recommendations in 1995, the USDA came back two years later with their version of the rules for organic agriculture that were hardly reminiscent to those proposed by the NOSB (Fromartz, 2006). What is more, the USDA’s first issuance of the rules was rewritten in such a way so as to allow the use of what became dubbed the “big three”: genetically modified organisms (GMOs), fertilizer made from sewer sludge, and food irradiation. Fromartz (2006) points out that during this time the U.S. was in negotiations with Europe to permit their markets to accept U.S. products made with GMOs. Banning GMOs from organic production practices would have undermined that U.S.’s argument that these crops are safe. As a result, the U.S. Trade Representative and the Office of Science and Technology Policy successfully advocated to
the USDA for the inclusion of genetically engineered crops, even though the USDA was
admittedly not aware of any existing organic standards that allow GMOs.

Subsequent to the release of the proposed rules for organic food production to the
public, the USDA received and unprecedented 275,603 comments from consumers, farmers
and everyone in between (Fromartz, 2006). In 2000, when the final standards were reissued,
the USDA omitted “the big three” from the proposed legislation, signifying to those who had
contested their initial definition, that they had won this battle.

Since then there have been many episodes of contestation over the USDA’s
regulations that appear to be driven by special interests. In some instances, the USDA
withers and retracts contested rules, but as Fromartz (2006) writes, “This regulatory seesaw
raised questions about the USDA’s intentions, doing little to nurture a sense of trust in the
government’s ability to oversee the industry” (p. 202).

The ongoing contestation over the USDA’s authority provides evidence of the two
forms of contesting definitional authority identified by Clarke. First, critics of the USDA
challenged “the standards of evaluation that ostensibly authorize the controversial definition”
(p. 9). This means that opponents will try to persuade the definer to re-examine the definition
in question. There has been an upsurge of “organic” farmers and critics who do not agree
with the way in which organic has been defined by the USDA. Many often insinuate that the
USDA’s version of organic no longer represents their philosophies and practices. For
example, when Pollan (2006) interviewed Virginia farmer Joel Salatin of PolyFace Farm,
who is not certified organic but who practices sustainable farming techniques and strictly
serves only his neighboring communities, Salatin heatedly expressed his frustration on the
term organic and stated,
We never call ourselves organic – we call ourselves ‘beyond organic’. Why dumb down to a lesser level than we are? If I said I was organic, people might fuss at me for getting corn from a neighbor who uses atrazine. Well, I would much rather use my money to keep my neighborhood productive and healthy than export my dollars 500 miles to get ‘pure product’ that’s really coated in diesel fuel. There are a whole lot more variables in making the right decision than does the chicken feed have chemicals or not. Like what sort of habitat is going to allow that chicken to express its physiological distinctiveness? A ten-thousand-bird shed that stinks to high heaven or a new paddock of fresh green grass every day? Now which chicken shall we call ‘organic’? I’m afraid you’ll have to ask the government, because now they own the word (p. 132).

Clearly, Salatin is not in agreement with how the USDA has defined organic and sites a few examples of principles of organic farming that he perhaps believes should have been included in the definition of organic, such as: a commitment to one’s community by keeping it financially viable; decreasing the distance food travels, thus cutting back on fossil fuels; ensuring that all animals are living a humane life according to their “physiological distinctiveness”; and, not permitting one entity to “own” organic.

Nutritionist, writer, and farmer Joan Dye Gussow, despite having served on the NOSB, is also among those who have been critical towards how organic has been defined. Soon after the USDA standards were put into effect, Gussow stated in the September/October 2002 issue of Organic Gardening, “This isn’t what we meant. When we said organic, we meant local. We meant healthful. We meant being true to the ecologies of regions. We meant mutually respectful growers and eaters. We meant social justice and equality” (as quoted in Severson, 2002).

Elizabeth Henderson, a university professor turned organic farmer 20 years ago, grows 70 different organic fruits, vegetables, and herbs on her 15-acre Peacework Organic Farm near Rochester, New York. She operates a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program (a program where typically consumers directly pay a farmer for a weekly supply of
fresh produce during the growing season) and fervently believes organic should mean more than just no pesticides or chemicals were used. Rather organic is a movement that should include community building, farmworker rights, transparency, building relationships with customers and is “an alternative to the industrial food system” (as quoted in Singer & Mason, 2006, p. 217). For Henderson, the meaning of organic has been polluted as the industry has lost touch with the ideals she upholds on her farm (Fromartz, 2006).

In all these ways, critics have tried to appeal to the standards that should be met for evaluating whether a particular definition of organic is fully inclusive of the range of ideals embodied in the organic movement. Each directly refers to the USDA’s “official” definition of organic and argues what that definition ought to include. These examples reflect the culmination of many disputes over definitional authority that have been documented throughout this paper. The previous section demonstrates how farmers and critics object to the substance of the USDA’s definition of organic. Their objections focus on the standards that they feel should be met for food to be considered organic.

This contestation over the meaning of organic also provides evidence of Clarke’s second form of contesting definitional authority. She says that critics can ask, “Does the contestation advance a claim about the definition’s failure to sustain the mutually recognized dialogue types for which it was invented” (pg. 9). In other words, contesting definitional authority may take place when critics object that the definition does not serve to sustain effective types of dialogue and communication. This objection is at the heart of the move from “organic” to “local”, as many small-scale, local organic farmers want to promote a certain dialogue about the way in which food is grown and the implications thereof, which is easily avoidable under the USDA organic label. Phil Howard, food systems scholar, asserted
in an interview, “Some [small farmers] have already given up on the term ‘organic’ to describe their values. They would rather explain exactly how they grew the food, or even invite customers to see their farm, than pay hundreds of dollars for a certification that they see as a sort of a lowest common denominator” (as quoted in Lindsay, 2006). Again, we are reminded of Pollan’s observation that even the pastoral narratives found on organic food packaging, alongside the USDA organic logo, are an “imperfect substitute” that prohibits engagement, or in this case, dialog with the source of one’s food. Further, the central problem with the USDA definition of “organic” is that it ignores what Guthman calls “the social focus of organic agriculture”.

CHALLENGING DEFINITIONAL AUTHORITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

In Western Montana, Clarke’s postulations about contesting definitional authority are exemplified by a group of small-scale farmers who practice sustainable farming techniques, many of which correlate with the USDA organic standards. However, this group of growers is going beyond organic certification because, as one founding member, Steve Elliot stated, “organic certification standards only begin to define my farm” (Elliott, S., 2006, pg. 8). In 2005, 19 farmers representing 12 farms, as well as one non-profit organization, formed the Montana Sustainable Growers’ Union (MSGU).

All founding farmers grow their food within a 75 mile radius of Missoula and commit to selling their products primarily regionally and in state. The group markets their products using the “Homegrown” label which was unveiled in summer, 2006 (see Figure 2). All members must agree to manage their farms according to a 10-point pledge founding members collectively developed as a way of maintaining and enhancing trust with their customers as well as among the farmers. According to an article in the Missoula Independent,

The Homegrown Pledge also props up farming ethics where the organic standards fall short, including areas such as crop diversity (versus monoculture), local economy, education and farmer-to-farmer relations. Members are expected to assist one another at becoming better farmers, and help each other meet the pledge’s requirements (LeVaux, 2006).

Indeed, Homegrown aims to address the many issues intertwined in agriculture and society and generally presents itself as a potential solution (on a local level) to the problems
with our complex food system. Again, for Steve Elliott, being a member of the Homegrown group allows him to participate in many practices a national program could never offer.

I wanted to spend my time working with my neighbors on a local food system. I wanted customers to visit our farm, talk with me at farmers’ markets and be able to know where and how their food is grown. Likewise, I wanted to work with my fellow growers to improve all of our farms, share information, and avoid competition through communication (Elliott, S., 2006, p. 8).

For MSGU, a direct connection with one’s community is paramount. They state, “Our relationship with the earth through agriculture is wholly dependent on our relationship with our community” (MSGU brochure). They suggest that for organic farmers “that relationship is being defined by organic certification under the National Organic Program.”

MSGU does acknowledge there is value in USDA certification, especially for those growers who cannot have a direct relationship with their customers. However, MSGU members “will prioritize the relationship between growers and customers, thus enhancing the value of community and a local economy.” Many of the MSGU members have been certified organic and some will remain certified. Others have admitted they will allow their certification to lapse, allowing MSGU membership to serve as a local certification alternative that is based on the ecological and cultural uniqueness of Western Montana. Elliott recognizes “certification has done a good job in educating the public about organic practices but it doesn’t touch our social goals. Who better to talk about these values than the small local farmer?” (Elliott, S., 2006, p. 8). In this way, MSGU can engage in the type of dialog they see as critical to building, promoting, and sustaining an alternative food system.
VISIONS OF ORGANIC (AND BEYOND) AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Other small, local farmers have had the opportunity to address the public beyond the one-on-one conversations they have with their customers at the farmers’ markets at which they typically sell their goods. The Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) broadcasts monthly commentaries on Montana Public Radio’s Evening Edition news program. Regularly, these commentaries feature the voices and words of Montana farmers, ranchers, and local food advocates. While some of the commentators promote organic agriculture by mentioning that their farm is certified organic or suggesting customers should support organic farmers, it is clear they recognize the importance of going beyond the technical requirements of their certification in order to achieve a stable, localized food system. Like MSGU, the underlying theme of most of the commentaries is to get listeners to think about the importance of connecting consumers with growers, having a strong, independent food economy that is culturally and ecologically appropriate, and further, what action consumers can take in helping these ideals become a reality.

Laura Garber grows her certified organic vegetables on a small farm just outside of Hamilton. She suggests one way in which consumers can help in building Montana’s food system is by seeking out particular labels that communicate, above all else, that the product was made in Montana. Garber explains that the “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” campaign AERO has been at the forefront of promoting offers colorful signage that distinctly indicates when a product originated in Montana (see Figure 3). She names the Homegrown label as an indication that those growers use “earth friendly” farming methods and “brings a
sense of community between the farmers themselves and as well as with the customers they serve” (Garber, 2006). Finally, Garber advocates that consumers “choose Montana Certified Organic foods over out of state organic and recognize the broader effects this support” (see Figure 4). Interestingly, Garber encourages consumers to continue buying certified organic; however, by suggesting consumers purchase Montana certified organic, she hints at the idea that the better organic is local organic. Garber’s suggestions promote a dialog that continues to be centered on the social issues associated with organic farming, one of course being, that organic farming should represent a commitment to providing sustenance to neighboring communities.

A rancher from Livingston, Tom Elliott, provides several strategies for “co-creating a local food system.” Among them he suggests we 1) “replace imports”; 2) “don’t eat their [trans-nationals] food”; 3) “support appropriate-scale value-added processing”; 4) “believe that small is beautiful and bountiful”; 5) “recognize the multi-functional aspects of agriculture”; 6) “use community supported agriculture”; and 7) “support organic agriculture” (Elliott, T., 2006). Initially, Elliott’s final suggestion that we support organic agriculture after naming off several actions that are not addressed in the USDA’s definition of organic seems odd. But he further goes on to say, “The ethic of organic agriculture puts into practice the strategies I have listed.” Elliott is challenging consumers to re-think what organic agriculture should entail. By coupling “organic” with the other “strategies” he lists, Elliott is subtly suggesting there is more to organic than a logo on a box of cereal, which could then motivate consumers to look beyond the USDA label.
In the north Helena valley, Cindy Baril grows a variety of certified organic produce which she sells at the Helena farmers’ market. Baril is a strong advocate of farmers’ markets as they bring consumers and farmers together to talk about agriculture. She states, “I gain much satisfaction with the relationship I have with our customers.” and “It is an educational process for all of us…” referring to the type of dialog she is able to have with her customers at the farmers’ market (Baril, 2006). This alternative form of food distribution “provides fresh, often organic and sustainably grown local food to communities. Foods are fresh, tasty, and healthy, having not traveled thousands of miles to where we live, been in long storage, or treated with chemicals to prevent spoilage.” Similar to Tom Elliott, Baril acknowledges “organic” as “sustainable” and therefore fresh, flavorful, and healthy. While the USDA label can assure customers of some standards (no pesticides or synthetic fertilizers), it cannot assure us that our food has not traveled great distances, been treated with an “approved” substance from the National List, been sitting in storage or refrigerated trucks for several days, or that it is in any way healthier. Local food, according to Baril, and many others, can offer that assurance.

Heather Kahler, a baker and caterer from the Bozeman area who is committed to cooking with local ingredients, believes there are “social, economic, and environmental reasons for purchasing locally raised food” (Kahler, 2005). “When we have the opportunity to see our food being raised and meet the people who are raising it, we are able to make an educated purchasing decision…When we directly exchange our grocery money with the person who raised our food, we create a relationship. The consumer and the grower provide sustenance directly to each other.” Under the auspices of USDA certified organic, the loss of that direct relationship Kahler is referring to is one of the organic industry’s greatest
tragedies. Without that direct relationship the kind of communication necessary for creating real change in the food system cannot take place. And, as Kahler points out, as consumers, we make “educated purchasing decisions” when we know the farmer and rancher who raises our food.
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

So where does this leave us, the consumer? With so many messages about food coming at us each day and with the increasing criticism and skepticism USDA certified organic products are receiving, it becomes difficult to make informed purchases. It has been established there is a growing concern for how the organic movement has transformed into an industry full of corporate players and fewer small farms. In an attempt to preserve the pioneering principles of the movement, small-scale, family farmers are responding by promoting alternatives (e.g., eating local) to what was once the alternative. Consumers may begin to experience increased uncertainty and confusion as our food system becomes ever more complex. As a result, consumers’ buying decisions may become compromised by a lack of knowledge about the issues hidden behind the various labels and marketing schemes thrown at them with every push of the shopping cart. Considering the average consumer is not going to take the time to read the USDA’s Organic Standards or other texts that discuss the potential negative implications of a National Organic Program, how can consumers critically evaluate the messages about organic food, particularly when a handful of small farmers here in Western Montana place some emphasis on being “organic”? How can both the small-scale family farms and the industrial size, monocrop farms both call themselves organic without questions arising? As many of my examples have demonstrated, there lies a tension between the two entities. However, this tension affords consumers the opportunity to get informed on the issues.

Food Literacy Leads to Food Citizenry and Democracy

One way in which consumers can become more informed is by increasing “food literacy.” Similar to the idea of media or environmental literacy, food literacy, for the
purpose of this project, means educating all people about the food system, making apparent and meaningful the role they play within the system, and the effect the food system has on their lives, in an effort to encourage widespread, informed participation as a “food citizen” in a “food democracy”.

Many food system scholars believe that we need to go beyond being complacent consumers to being “food citizens”. As food citizens, Wilkins (2005) explains, we have certain food rights associated with where we live in that we should have access to safe and nutritious food as well as accurate product information; however, we are reminded that we have certain responsibilities associated with these rights. Wendell Berry (1989) observes that most consumers, however, do not recognize their responsibilities as food citizens, rather, we have become passive, naïve, and dependent, and that a population of consumers who never think about our food system and its sustainability is exactly the goal of the industrial food system. Practicing responsibility as a food citizens can simply begin by thinking about our current food system and the long-term affects our consuming habits will have on our environment, community, health, etc. and followed by taking any kind of proactive action, including purchasing food from farmers’ markets or requesting that your favorite grocery store sell locally and sustainably produced food (Wilkins, 2005).

When we become food citizens, we become participants in a “food democracy”. Hassanein (2002, p. 79) examines the emerging concept of food democracy and its implications and states:

At the core of food democracy is the idea that people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators on the sidelines. In other words, food democracy is about citizens having the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.
Hassanein explains that the term food democracy makes food a political issue which implies active participation. Just as we go to the polls on Election Day to vote for the candidates who will best represent our beliefs and values, the food we purchase at the grocery store is a vote in favor of a particular product and how it was planted, cultivated, harvested, processed, packaged, and transported. When we are actively involved in the decision making processes regarding our food system and making responsible food decisions, we are practicing our very right as a food citizen. The concepts of food citizen and food democracy go hand-in-hand and provide rationale for the creation of a food literacy kit.

A Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet

An outcome of this paper is the creation of a proposed “Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet” that is geared toward helping consumers become more “organic foods” literate. I envision this organic foods literacy packet as being one component of a larger consumer food literacy kit that could be broken down into several topical packets that focus on a particular issue concerning our food system.

Throughout this paper, I have detailed significant criticisms pertaining to how the USDA has defined organic and have examined the local responses to what that definition fails to address. This provided me with a solid base for considering ways to approach consumer education on the various arguments and issues; however, the development of a place based organic food literacy packet was somewhat stifled due to a substantial shortcoming of my research. Particularly, this shortcoming is a lack of data indicating Western Montana consumers’ current knowledge of the definition of USDA certified organic versus labels fashioned by various groups and farmers in the state. Such data could have afforded me greater insight and understanding as to how consumers perceive USDA organic
foods in comparison to locally and organically or sustainably grown foods by small-scale farmers. Hence, gaps in knowledge could have been addressed in the organic foods component of the consumer food literacy kit. Despite this weakness in my research, it is my hope that the packet will nevertheless prove educational and motivate consumers to think more critically about the food they vote for at the cash register. Additionally, the packet is meant to be accessible to shoppers of varying levels of interest and concern for what they are feeding themselves and their families.

The components of the proposed “Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet” include, 1) a page that provides an overview of the packet explaining why it has been created and what purpose it serves, 2) a contents page for easy navigation, 3) a page that describes what USDA Certified Organic is, including some background information and basic standards, 4) a page that demonstrates what USDA Certified Organic is not, that is, what the USDA standards do not address or mandate, 5) a page that details the issues not addressed or mandated by USDA organic standards that are advocated for by small-scale farmers and non-profit organizations, 6) a page describing labels developed by various organizations here in Montana in an effort to get consumers to think beyond the USDA organic label, and 7) a resources page devoted to highlighting a few of Montana’s local food and sustainable farming non-profit organizations that consumers will hopefully be motivated to learn more about, subsequently becoming more active and literate food citizens participating in efforts to create a food democracy within Montana.

Based on my analysis of the issues through the lens of definitional disputes, I believe this packet is a good starting point for encouraging consumers to engage in critical evaluation of organic food and farming as defined by the USDA. For me, this organic food literacy
packet will always be a work in progress. There will always be a different way in which certain information could be presented or additional information to include, and, of course, the realization that some things could be omitted so as not to overwhelm consumers. With that said, it is a step towards thinking about ways in which we can facilitate food literacy and further communication about the issues addressed in this paper.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of researching, writing about, and creating an organic food literacy packet, I gained a deeper understanding of that contentious segment of the food industry that, like every other, is filled with competing interests. Employing literature on definitional disputes proved valuable and insightful as I explored the myriad of criticisms as a result of these competing interests. The literature provided me with a unique lens through which to analyze the arguments both against and in favor of national organic standards and afforded me a useful framework for creating the practical component of my research.

I also have gained a greater appreciation for the small-scale farmers who have been practicing organic farming techniques since long before it became a marketing tool co-opted by industrial agrofood companies. In the face of this co-optation, they are challenging their adversaries with their own ways of talking about sustainable agriculture. I admire their gusto and ambition as they contest the distant authorities by defining for themselves what ecologically sound farming practices should encompass. They are the farmers shaping the movement that goes beyond organic, that focuses on building culturally and ecologically sustainable and regionally-based farming systems. It is my belief that this is a movement that cannot be tamed by a national definition. Reminiscent of the spirit of the organic movement, the farmers of this movement embody a kind of zeal for again going against the mainstream. As Luci Brieger, co-owner of LifeLine Farm in Victor, Montana stated in an interview, “When organic started out, those of us that got certified were considered rebels. Now we’re considered rebels for getting out of it” (as quoted in LeVaux, 2006). Rebel on!
References


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Appendix A: March 12, 2007 cover of TIME
By Phil Howard
Appendix D: A Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet

A CONSUMERS’ ORGANIC FOOD LITERACY PACKET

By Jennifer A. von Sehlen
M.A. Degree Candidate—Department of Communication Studies—The University of Montana
Dear Consumer & Eater:

Welcome to “A Consumers’ Organic Food Literacy Packet” - a packet aimed at increasing consumers’ “literacy” when it comes to shopping for organic products. This packet is a product of my professional paper that focused significantly on the transformation of organic farming, from movement to industry. The organic industry has recently received a lot of attention—both negative and positive. Numerous books, newspaper and magazine articles, and websites discuss the rapid growth of the organic food industry and associated criticisms of the industry. It is worthwhile to learn about these discussions. In doing so, we all become more informed consumers.

In my paper, I took the approach that the way in which terms, such as “organic,” are defined can cause disputes between different groups of people. Farmers, food companies, agricultural businesses, grocery store owners, special interest groups, environmentalists, and consumers all want to have a say in how “organic,” as a legal term, is defined. This is because terms that are made into law have substantial consequences for everyone involved. The disputes over the definition of “organic” influenced what I included in this packet.

It is my hope that you, the consumer, will learn a little something new about United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Certified Organic. Also, I hope you gain an understanding as to why alternatives to USDA organic, particularly on the local level, are on the rise.

Happy Eating!

OVERVIEW:
Topics Explored in this Packet:

I. What is USDA Certified Organic?

II. What USDA Certified Organic is Not

III. Going Beyond USDA Organic at the Local Level

IV. Understanding Local Labels

V. Local Resources
Some Background:
The USDA is the department within the federal government that oversees the National Organic Program (NOP). The NOP regulations were developed so that all products labeled organic meet the same consistent standards. USDA Certified Organic means a product (crops and livestock) was grown, processed, and handled according to specific standards that were put into effect in 2002. Many of these standards are very technical and scientific making them measurable and verifiable. Additionally, the NOP manages the “National List” which refers to what non-synthetic substances are allowed and what synthetic substances are prohibited in organic food production. Organic growers, processors, and handlers are certified annually by an USDA-approved certifying agent.

Some Basic Standards:
♦ Soil fertility is managed through tillage, crop rotations, planting cover crops, and supplemented with animal and crop waste, and allowed synthetic materials.
♦ The use of organic seeds and planting stock is preferred, but non-organic sources may be used under specific conditions.
♦ Crop pests, weeds, and diseases are managed through physical, mechanical, and biological controls. If these methods are not sufficient, a biological, botanical, or synthetic Substance - approved for use on the “National List” - may be used.
♦ Genetic engineering, ionizing radiation (radiation applied to food to prevent spoilage and to kill bacteria), and sewer sludge are prohibited.
♦ Livestock must be fed 100% organic feed, and may receive allowed vitamin and mineral supplements.
♦ All animals must have access to the outdoors and to pasture for grazing.
♦ Growth hormones and antibiotics are prohibited; vaccinations are allowed.

All of the above information derived from the USDA NOP website. To learn more visit: www.ams.usda.gov/nop/FactSheet/ProdHandE.html

While USDA organic standards do address many production issues, particularly with regard to approved and prohibited substances, there are many other agricultural and social issues the NOP either does not address or mandate.

PART I: WHAT IS USDA CERTIFIED ORGANIC?
A product labeled USDA Certified Organic does not always mean it...

- Came from a small, ecologically-diverse family farm
- Supports your local farmers & community.
- Did not travel hundreds or thousands of miles.
- Is fresher or more nutritious.
- Was not grown on a large, industrial monocrop farm.
- Was cultivated by farm workers receiving fair wages for fair labor.

**Part II. What USDA Certified Organic is Not**
In Montana, farmers and non-profit organizations all across the state are having conversations about how to promote and expand sustainable and organic farming. Often, these conversations lead to discussing “beyond organic” topics, including the many agricultural and social issues the NOP either does not address or mandate. Naturally, on the top of their list is promoting sustainable, local food systems. Sustainable farming on the local level includes most, if not all, aspects of the USDA organic standards, but is more attentive to some greater issues. Some of these include:

**Keeping food distribution to a minimum** - This ensures fresher, more nutritious foods, harvested at their peak that don't have to make a long journey across the country or the continents.

**Reducing dependence of fossil fuels** - Sustainable agriculture includes reducing the amount of carbon dioxide that is emitted into our environment, from farm machinery to air-conditioned semi-trucks and jet planes used for transporting foods.

**Strengthening our local economies** - When the food grown by our local farmers is purchased within our community, dollars stay in our neighborhoods. Also, the farmer sees more of those dollars because far fewer “middlemen” are necessary.

**Transparency** - This is the idea that people should know where their food comes from. Participating in our local food system means we have the opportunity to meet and directly talk to our farmers and ranchers as well as visit their operations.

**Building many small, diversified farms** - We are better served if we live in a community surrounded by several diversified farms rather than a few industrial farms producing hundreds of acres of the same couple of crops.

*Within both mainstream organic and conventional agriculture, there is a disconnect between grower and consumer. This disconnect prevents dialog from taking place which can lead to positive changes within our food system.*

**PART III. GOING BEYOND USDA ORGANIC AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**
The “Homegrown” label was developed by the Montana Sustainable Growers’ Union (MSGU). The owners and operators of 12 farms located within a 75 mile radius of Missoula are the founding members. All agree to manage their farms according to a 10-point pledge and participate in annual site visits to each other’s farms to ensure adherence to the pledge while collaboratively learning from one another. Some members are, or have been, certified organic, others see membership as a local alternative to certification. MSGU members are highly committed to enriching their neighboring communities’ unique cultures through agriculture, by strengthening local economies, improving ecology, practicing conservation, and producing high-quality, fresh foods everyone can access. Member and contact information is available on their website. Many members also sell at the Missoula Farmers’ Market, where you can talk to them personally. Look for their “Homegrown” sign. Website: www.homegrownmontana.com.

The “Buy Fresh, Buy Local Montana” sign is a marketing and education campaign managed by the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO). Stores, restaurants, and businesses may use the sign to indicate they sell Montana-grown and raised products. The sign helps consumers find the vast array of Montana goods available. The campaign is not a certification program of any kind, therefore growing and production methods are not addressed by the sign. For more information about the campaign, contact AERO. Website: www.aeromt.org/buylocal.php. Phone: (406) 443-7272

If you are committed to buying certified organic products, look for the “Montana Certified Organic” label. The Montana Department of Agriculture is accredited to certify organic producers and handlers under the USDA National Organic Program. Producers and handlers are certified according to the USDA standards, however, by purchasing Montana Certified Organic products, you are supporting our state’s certified growers. This helps to keep money circulating in our communities. Currently there are over 100 Montana Certified Organic producers and Handlers. Website: http://agr.state.mt.us/organic/Program.asp. Phone (406) 444-3730.

PART IV. UNDERSTANDING LOCAL LABELS
To learn more about groups and organizations in Montana and the Missoula area working on issues related to local food, sustainable agriculture, and food distribution, check out:

**Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO)** - “AERO is a Montana-based non-profit grassroots membership organization dedicated to sustainable resource use and community vitality. We promote sustainable agriculture, “smart growth” planning and transportation alternatives, renewable energy and conservation, environmental quality, and community self-reliance.” AERO annually produces: *Abundant Montana - AERO's Directory to Sustainably Grown Montana Food*. The directory provides an extensive list of a diverse range of growers in MT. Look for farms that offer a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for a weekly supply of fresh produce. [Website: www.aeromt.org.](http://www.aeromt.org) [Phone: (406) 443-7272](http://406.7272)

**Grow Montana** - A coalition created “to promote community economic development policies that support sustainable Montana-owned food production, processing, and distribution, and that improve all of our citizens' access to Montana foods.”

**Community Food & Agriculture Coalition** - “Our mission is to develop and strengthen Missoula County’s food system: promoting regional self-reliance; assuring all citizens equal access to healthy, affordable, and culturally-appropriate food. CFAC facilitates dialogue, education, and collaboration within the community, encouraging creative problem-solving and proactive policy advocacy.”
[Website: www.umt.edu/cfa/default.htm.](http://www.umt.edu/cfa/default.htm) [Phone: (406) 880-0543](http://880.0543).

For information on accessing local food in the Missoula area, check out:

**AERO's Montana Farmers' Market Directory** - Montana is home to over 30 Farmers' Markets across the state. AERO’s directory is located at: [www.aeromt.org/farm_markets.php](http://www.aeromt.org/farm_markets.php)

**Missoula Community Co-op** - MCC’s mission is “to create a member owned and operated marketplace, making accessible a variety of nutritious bulk, natural, and local foods and products.”
[Website: www.missoulacommercialmarket.org.](http://www.missoulacommercialmarket.org) [Phone: (406) 728-2369](http://728.2369).

**Garden City Harvest (Missoula)** - GCH offers community garden plots and gardening opportunities, provides fresh produce to low income people via food assistance programs, and offers education and training opportunities in ecological food production to the public, youth, and university students. GCH also operates a CSA program.
[Website: www.gardencityharvest.org.](http://www.gardencityharvest.org) [Phone: (406) 523-3663](http://523.3663)

Be an active participant in your local food system!
Buy direct from growers at Farmers’ Market ~ Join a CSA program ~ Join a food co-op ~
Shop at grocery stores that stock locally grown/produced products ~ Eat at restaurants featuring local ingredients ~ Visit a nearby farm ~ Grow a garden or container veggies ~
Volunteer at a community garden ~ Eat in season ~ Preserve food surplus to eat later

**PART V. RESOURCES**