
An Analysis of the Myth and Issues of Our Organic Food System

In the last decade, a new fad has been sweeping the nation: Organic Foods. All around America organic markets like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's are popping up, offering a variety of organic produce, grass-fed beef, cage-free eggs, and all natural cosmetic products. People switch to organic products usually out of a desire to eat healthier, and take a stance on conventional agriculture and meat products. Food markets such as Whole Foods do indeed feel more welcoming when you step inside. As compared to most food and drug stores, you are greeted with warm lighting and earth colored walls and floor, instead of fluorescent lights and linoleum floors. The meat section has elaborate details, depicting pastoral settings of cows on wide, open grazing fields, and chickens running wild. Every object in the produce aisle is traced back to the place where it was grown, and the "USDA Organic Certified" label is printed on most everything. In this setting, consumers feel they are eating the healthy alternative, with no synthetic hormones, pesticides, or GMOs. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. These foods do indeed come from organically certified farms, but these farms are not as airtight in regulation as one might assume. In reference to these welcoming organic products and their origin, Michael Pollan, author of *Omnivore's Dilemma*, states "They're organic by the letter, not organic in spirit... if most organic consumers went to those places, they would feel they were getting ripped off." In the organic system, there are tons of loopholes allowing them to sell less than organic products to the consumer. And we fall for it.

Today, we import more food from around the world than ever before. We have dissolved ourselves from a time where spices were one of the most valuable commodities to a time when we can walk into our local food and drug store and have everything we could want from all around the world at our fingertips. While this may seem like a dream come true compared to the old days, it does not come without severe consequences. Higher food prices come as a result, chemicals are being sprayed in mass amounts, from synthetic hormones to preservatives, and carbon emissions are at an all time high due in part to the use of fossil fuels used to transport these food stuffs from all around the globe. This is not sustainable.

Many see organic farming as a feasible way to fix this mess. However, organic farming is not as different to regular agriculture as one might think at first. Upon further inspection, organic farming standards are not airtight, and leave plenty of room for harmful pesticide spraying. The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) requires that these chemicals and pesticides must come from a "natural source". Take Rotenone for example. Rotenone was a chemical used for spraying organic produce for decades. In her article *Mythbusting 101: Organic Farming > Conventional Agriculture*, Christie Wilcox writes "Because it is natural in origin, occurring in the roots and stems of a small number of subtropical plants, it was considered "safe" as well as "organic". However, research has shown that rotenone is highly dangerous because it kills by attacking mitochondria, the energy powerhouses of all living cells." Rotenone was linked to Parkinson's Disease in rats and can also result in death for humans. This was allowed because of it's "natural source", but natural does not always mean good for you. These chemicals that come from a natural source are then lightly processed, if at all. NOSB is an organization that also votes on proposed pesticides allowed for organic farming, so the list is always changing.

Another troubling aspect about these chemicals is that the volume that they are sprayed is not monitored by the government. A lot of these chemicals are sprayed in heavy volumes, which can pose serious health hazard to people and the environment. This is because often times these chemicals are not as strong as conventionally used pesticides, so it takes more to have their proper effect. So then what is the point of these organic foods? The organic food market has made \$52 billion in the last couple years worldwide, so it is most obviously turning a profit. Is certified organic food becoming widely available to provide the masses with a healthy, ethical alternative, or are corporations like Whole Foods painting these beautiful pictures of to gain a profit? It could possibly be a mix of both. Organic foods are not bad, despite what it might sound like, and do often provide a healthier alternative for consumers. However, these corporations are using a “supermarket pastoral” to sell their products that makes it easier to cover up what’s going on behind the scenes. As Michael Pollan states, “Supermarket Pastoral is a most seductive literary form, beguiling enough to survive in the face of a great many discomfiting facts.”

In order to ensure a healthier organic market with more accessible information, the organic food market must have different standards and more monitoring from the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). As of now, the USDA still allows some GMO’s to be used in organic farming, but the screening process allows them to slip by unnoticed. USDA organizations like National Organic Program (NOP) set the regulations for organic food, grant certificates, and do investigations when certified organic farmers are under suspicion of violating code. But the level of regulation that actually exists is extremely lenient. This makes it so that the organic label is misleading, due to the product being treated with substances that are not truly organic. Once an organic farmer is certified organic, they must comply to a production plan. This plan is then approved by a certifying organic agent. Once the certification is granted, a farmer cannot be penalized if there is an unintentional use of GMO’s or inorganic pesticides used on the plants - as long as it is unintentional. This in turn creates a loophole that farmers can slip through, allowing them to use these inorganic substances as long as it is “unintentional” by nature. The products they put out can then be labeled organic even though this statement lacks truth, and their names are untarnished.

If suspicion arises that an organic farmer is abusing their production plan, and intentionally using pesticides, the USDA will step in. The USDA requires that “certifying agents test five percent of their certified operations each year. The certifying agents themselves determine which operations will be subjected to testing. (Henri Miller).” These testing policies are supported by organic communities and federations. The USDA’s response to why they impose such minimal testing is that an increase of testing would result in higher operating and production costs for organic farmers beyond the high expenses they already pay. This in turn would lead to higher prices in food markets. The fact of the matter is that organic food is already much more pricey than their chain-store counterparts, which makes organic food barely accessible to those in the low income bracket. And is higher prices something the public wants to pay for more widespread testing? It would certainly be better for those who can afford it, but it does not make much sense economically. “Wordy labels, point-of-purchase brochures, and certification schemes are supposed to make an obscure and complicated food chain more legible to the consumer (Pollan, 136).” While organic labeling certainly does clear up some of the confusion of point source, it could be doing more. For example, “free-range chicken” may not be what it seems. Tyler Cowen discusses this example in his article *Can You Really Save the Planet at the Dinner Table?* Which appeared on Slate.com, “though we feel good about eating “free-range” chickens—and are willing to pay more for them—many of those birds don’t

fare much better than their peers: They often receive only a few inches of additional space in factory farms and then a few weeks' time to step outside through a tiny door—and most chickens stay inside, having learned a fear of the unknown.”

The same can be said for organic milk. There are mass quantities of organic milk being produced in factory farms. Horizon, the largest organic dairy label was exposed by the Cornucopia Institute for having 4,000 - 10,000 cows in factory farms producing milk for the company. The company created the false sense that their cows were kept on green pastures with access to pristine grazing lands. The truth is, many more of their cows not in farming factories were being kept in southern Idaho in grassless conditions. Here they were milking thousands of cows that “spend their day milling around a dry lot - a grassless fenced enclosure (Pollan, 156).” When the USDA investigated complaints of the operation, they sent in the same agent that had originally approved the operation in the first place, as per policy. Eventually, due to the Cornucopia Institute filing legal cases against the company starting in 2004, Horizon was decertified and now remains under close speculation from the USDA.

Another myth that consumers are failing to realize is that organic farming is not always best for the environment. This is true for all agriculture, as pollutants from pesticides, fertilizer, and nutrients from unturned soil from the farm are swept away by rain and erosion, causing them to seep into the waterways surrounding them. This causes severe damage to rivers, lakes, and other water works, and is called nonpoint source pollution. Organic farms are not innocent of this either. And if while keeping in mind ecological preservation, it seems to make less sense to switch completely over to organic farming as more land would have to be cleared and cultivated for these farms to exist.

A way to help this dilemma would be to support local organic farms, which are less likely to spray harmful pesticides. This in turn helps to promote local economy, and would also spark a decrease in fossil fuels being used and carbon emissions being emitted to transport large quantities of food from across the country. However, this switch would not come without consequences. It would mean a cut in the variety in food available year round, such as no bananas in the dead of winter. Berries and other out of seasons produce could still be frozen however. But these sacrifices are relatively little compared to what we would be gaining - a more ethical, economically beneficial, and environmentally safer way to eat organically. On top of switching to small, local organic farms, there could also be tightening in the USDA's regulations on large-scale certified organic farmers. A possible way to do this without increasing production costs for organic companies would be to create government incentives and possible tax breaks for farmers to use better forms of pest control. Money could be saved simply by growing what is in season, considering it takes less pesticides to produce. When it comes to labeling, the “supermarket pastoral” may be a beautiful way to subdue our interests, but should be more transparent when it comes to where our food is sourced, including livestock and dairy products. Like Pollan says, we should be able to weigh out the pros and the cons in what we are eating.

Organic farming is a step in the right direction, but like most things, could use some refining. It's not an easy matter, Especially when large corporations like Monsanto show no interest in backing down. But if we were to work towards these guidelines, we would be closer to becoming healthier, for ourselves and for planet earth.