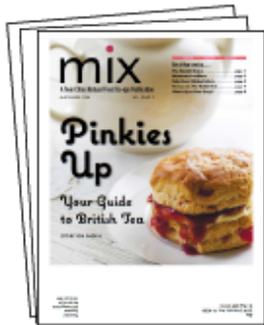


Search

[Home](#) [Blog](#) [Local Producers](#) [News](#) [Events](#) [Recipes](#) [Co-op Locations](#) [Current Specials](#) [Co-op 101](#) [Contact](#)

Home » [Organic Standards–U.S. and Overseas](#)

READ THE MIX



[Read the Mix](#), a bi-monthly publication produced by the co-ops.

RECENT TWEETS

Organic Standards–U.S. and Overseas

By Nancy Crotti

Worldwide demand for organic food has led many U.S. companies to supplement their domestic supply with food produced in other countries. How can consumers know if imported food that's labeled "organic" measures up to their standards?

"To be sold as organic in the U.S., any product has to be produced and processed according to our regulations and certified by a USDA-accredited certification agency," said Jim Riddle, organic outreach coordinator at the University of Minnesota Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton. "There are about 100 of those agencies, 55 of which are located in the U.S. and about 45 are located outside of our borders.

"They go through quite a rigorous audit to make sure that the agency understands and is enforcing standards, and that they have the competency and freedom of conflict of interest and adequate qualified staff," Riddle added.

Enforcement of organic standards by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's National Organic Program (NOP) suffered under the most recent Bush administration, but the Obama administration has beefed up the NOP and its enforcement efforts.

For example, the NOP reached a settlement in June with the Lincoln, Neb.-based Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA), which agreed to cease its organic certification program in China. A 2007 NOP audit found OCIA had used inspectors connected to the Chinese government, and that these inspectors had a conflict of interest with the certified organic operations.

OCIA retains its accreditation for certification activities in other countries, including the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and may reapply for certification in China after one year, according to NOP.

CO+OP DEALS



[Check out the current specials!](#)

EVENTS CALENDAR

Raw Food Demo

Location: Valley Natural Foods Demo Kiosk

Date: March 13, 2014

Time: 3:00pm

[View Calendar](#)

Gluten-Free Day

Location: Valley Natural Foods

Date: March 20, 2014

Time: all day

Valley Natural Foods 56m
@ValleyNatural

What a line-up
[@sewardcoop](#). Butternut Squash Enchilada Verde? Sounds like a winner!

Expand

Valley Natural Foods 1h
@ValleyNatural

It's the [@MNFoodShare](#) [#MarchCampaign](#). Help us reach 1500#s of donations for [@360Communities](#) [#foodshelf](#). YellowBins standing by at store exit

Seward Co-op 1h
@sewardcoop

Join us for lunch today:

Butternut Squash Enchilada Verde;
Jerked Chicken;
Veracruz Rice;
Catalan Roasted Vegetables;
Cuban Black Beans

Expand

POLL

What is your favorite winter warmer?:

- Hot cocoa
- A steaming mug of tea
- Homemade soup
- Anything spicy

OCIA did not respond to repeated requests for an interview for this story.

NOP completed another audit of four organic certifying agents in China Sept. 30, according to USDA spokeswoman Soo Kim. The agency conducts regular audits of accredited certifiers on a two-and-a-half-year cycle and follows up based on findings. NOP has recognition agreements that allow the governments of Egypt, Israel, Denmark, Argentina, Italy, Bolivia, Ghana and Germany to accredit certifying agents in their countries to certify organic products to NOP standards. NOP audits these agents on a two-year cycle and completed audits in those countries this year, Kim said. (To view NOP reports, visit <http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOPWhoWeAre>).

The OCIA situation is only the most recent one involving China that angers Mark Kastel, co-founder and senior farm policy analyst at the Wisconsin-based Cornucopia Institute, a farm policy research group and organic farming watchdog.

“For years, Cornucopia banged on the USDA to go over and audit the system in China,” Kastel said. When the agency conducted its first inspection there in 2007, it found multiple instances of noncompliance with USDA standards, including the failure of one certifying agent to provide a written and translated copy of USDA organic standards to all clients applying for certification. “How can these Chinese farmers affirm they are following the regulations if they haven’t even read the regulations?” Kastel wonders.

In its 2009 report, “Behind the Bean: The Heroes and Charlatans of the Natural and Organic Soy Foods Industry,” Cornucopia estimates that 100 million kilograms of organic soybeans and soy meal were imported from Asia (mostly from China) between March 2008 and March 2009. The organization claims that U.S. companies deciding to import cheaper organic soybeans from Asia has contributed to a shortage of domestic organic soybeans. This leaves domestic food companies with no option but to source their beans from other countries, shut down, or switch from organic to nongenetically modified-organism (GMO) conventional beans. (To read the report, which also rates organic soy product companies on a number of criteria, visit www.cornucopia.org).

Despite its previous failings, Kastel and Riddle now have more confidence in USDA and NOP.

“They’re still understaffed and have a lot of catch-up to do, [but] this agreement with OCIA banning them from China is one first step,” Kastel said.

“There have been significant increases in the budget,” added Riddle. “They’re calling this the ‘Age of Enforcement’ and placing a lot more scrutiny on foreign producers.”

But Kastel is still suspicious of food labeled “organic” that comes from China, which he said has high levels of soil, air and water pollution.

He likes to tell a story about finding a bag of frozen vegetables labeled “California Mix” and “Product of China” in a conventional grocery store in Wisconsin.

“We don’t have to buy our California mix from China,” Kastel said. “We can be conscious.”

[View Calendar](#)

Juicing -- A tasting/cooking demo with Sheryl

Location: Valley Natural Foods

Date: April 5, 2014

Time: 12:00pm

[View Calendar](#)



strongertogether.coop

Partners:



Vote

BLOG FEEDS

[Holiday Traditions Deli Menu](#)

[2013 Turkey Information](#)

[more](#)

Consumers have options when it comes to organics and food safety. “The ultimate security is to grow your own,” Kastel said. “People can shop from their own freezer. If you’re buying a processed product, read the label. Look at it carefully.”

Buying fresh, whole, local foods adds a level of security, but this isn’t always possible. “Certainly the best strategy is to, as much as possible, buy from local organic producers, eat foods in season and focus on minimally processed foods,” said Riddle. “A lot of these (imported) foods are out of season and are highly processed.”

Even imported organic food is likely to be less hazardous than nonorganic, Riddle added. “Compare that to nonorganic imported foods and there is a huge factor of risk that is much higher for pesticide residues and fumigants,” he said. “Conventional foods are routinely fumigated and they’re not labeled with what chemicals came in contact with those foods.”

These experts believe that shopping in co-ops adds a level of safety because they have found that co-op managers carefully consider the sources of the products they sell.

“I am a member of two co-ops here in Wisconsin and friends with many in the Twin Cities,” Kastel said. “I can go shopping and feel much less like I have to be the detective when I’m looking at every product in there.”

“The food co-ops in the Twin Cities are very committed to making sure that the producers that are selling organic into their systems are certified,” Riddle said. “The retailers have a role in this.”

Nancy Crotti is a freelance writer and editor based in St. Paul.

Copyright 2009-2010 Twin Cities Food Co-ops. All rights reserved.

Website Design & Development
by TRENCH MEDIA