



Western Perspective

BY JIM MOORE

Organics Coming of Age

WHAT can you say about an industry that's grown from \$78 million in 1980 to more than \$4 BILLION in 1998 and is projected to climb to roughly \$14 billion by 2008?

One word: Successful.

These are numbers that would send the propellers on the hats of Bill Gates' bean counters spinning out of control. Fourteen billion in U.S. jack is larger than the gross national product of many nations.

Politics aside, facts are facts. Organic production is by far, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. produce industry.

Recently in San Diego, a scant 30 or so people showed up for the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association's first-ever seminar on organic produce. However, less than a month earlier, more than 1500 registered during the four-day running of the 19th Annual Ecological Farming Conference at Asilomar State Park near Pebble Beach, CA.

I am not trying to say organic production is in any way taking over, or poised to displace conventional vegetable production in the U.S. Today, organic produce makes up less than 1% of the total market and projections – given the best-possible economic climate over the next 10 or so years – don't see certified organic produce capturing more than 10% market share.

A VOCAL MINORITY

But, like it or not, the so-called organic industry speaks with a voice that must be reckoned with and allowed to sit at the same negotiating tables. Its voice has already been heard loud and clear. On Dec. 16, 1997 the USDA published its first set of organic standards. Those standards allowed for biotechnology and other prac-

tices the organic community found objectionable.

Keith Jones of the USDA describes the date as one that will "live in infamy" at the department as some 275,603 registered their objections to the proposed standards (about

Organics by the Numbers

THE Organic Farming Research Foundation's third biennial National Organic Farmer's Survey of 1200 certified organic growers from 44 states found:

87% are single family operations or family partnerships;

56% have college degrees;

47.5 is the average age;

80% of products are marketed through wholesale;

10 tons per acre was the median yield of organic tomatoes;

\$1.20 per pound was the median price received by organic tomatoes;

45% of organic growers use *Bacillus thuringiensis*.

170,000 in form letters and e-mails). "This marked by far the largest public response in USDA history," he said.

"This is a group that can mobilize very, very quickly. They are energetic, intelligent and vocal," Jones told the audience at United.

USDA Deputy Secretary Rich Rominger assured a packed house of more than 300 at Asilomar that when the standards are released again, "Summerish 1999," they

will not contain provisions allowing for genetic engineering, biosolids, or irradiation in the production or sale of certified organic produce.

Enforcement of these standards, both for produce grown in the U.S., and imported as certified organic from abroad, remains a major, unresolved issue.

ORGANICS GOING MAINSTREAM

The overall picture here is that the organic industry can no longer be viewed as a few left-over hippies tossing some Wal-Mart tomato seeds among their hemp plants. Organic produce is no longer found only at roadside stands and farmers' markets. Small-to medium-sized outlets are springing up in major metro areas to accommodate organic products including produce.

Many say the industry is actually having problems keeping up with its own popularity. Today, the California Certified Organic Farmers tallies more than 800 registered growers, processors and handlers of organic products.

Are traditionally conventional growers jumping on the bandwagon? Yes and no. At Asilomar, I talked to one ranch foreman who asked not to be identified. He oversees 1500 acres of conventional produce near King City, CA. "This year we have 300 acres of organic. Next year we're shooting for 650 acres."

His figures are in line with a recent report that shows organic acreage in Salinas County — home of America's salad bowl — up eightfold since 1991.

At the same conference I talked to a very good friend who is the foreman of a 5000-acre conventional vegetable operation in Arizona. "We're not switching to organic," he said, "I'm just here to learn any new practices that might be valuable for our operation."

When agriculture's heavy hitters start getting into the game, it's time for the rest of the industry to sit up and pay attention. **AVG**

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