

A longtime organic tomato farmer believes this could effectively be the beginning of "divorce proceedings" between the organic movement and the USDA's National Organic Program.

The U.S. National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) has controversially voted against banning hydroponic and aquaponic crops being eligible for organic certification, in a move that has provoked strong opinions from the sector's stakeholders.



The vote took place last week as part of the advisory board's fall meeting in Jacksonville, Florida, which was open to the public and involved a range of testimonies given to the 15-member board.

The board voted to prohibit aeroponic agriculture - which grows plants suspended in the air with their roots exposed - but did not pass motions to ban hydroponics, a method that cultivates plants in water-based nutrient solutions, or aquaponics which combines hydroponic systems with farmed fish operations.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) spokesperson told *Fresh Fruit Portal* the NOSB had heard two days of testimony that were mostly focused on the three production systems.

"The Board did not come to agreement on any recommendations about the certification of hydroponic or aquaponic production systems. Both systems remain eligible for Organic Certification," she said.

"The Board passed a proposal to recommend prohibition of aeroponics systems in organic production. Certification of aeroponic operations also remains allowed while USDA considers the Board's work on this topic."

Organic pioneers have typically argued that including hydroponic crops in the National Organic Program (NOP) undermines the integrity of the label, and that nurturing the fertility of the soil is a fundamental aspect of the farming method.

Meanwhile, those on the other side of the debate have held that there should be no issue including hydroponics as long as farming inputs are organic.

Maintaining the status quo

Organic Trade Association (OTA) farm policy director Nate Lewis said that this vote essentially maintained the status quo for the vast majority of the industry.

"All these systems have been allowed in organic since 2002, so I think the outcome - with the exception of aeroponics - shouldn't really change the reality for many producers," he said, explaining that organic aeroponics represented a tiny proportion of the sector.

He said the OTA would have supported the motion to ban hydroponics - as it did in 2010 when the NOSB recommended prohibiting the production method - if the definition of the production system had remained unchanged.

However, he said that as the Crops Subcommittee had revised the definition and coupled it with proposed standards for organic container production - which involves raising plants in containers filled with a mixture of organic matter, water and nutrients - the association therefore did not support it this time round.

It should be noted that despite the NOSB previously voting to recommend hydroponics be banned from organic certification - albeit at a time when the hydroponic industry was far less developed than today - the advice was not upheld by regulator the NOP.

Lewis also commented that among the OTA's members were those who strongly supported organic certifications for hydroponics and those who strongly opposed them, but said there was a "significant segment" of membership in the middle who thought entirely water-based systems shouldn't be allowed but container production should be, with appropriate guidelines and standards.

Banning would have been "irresponsible"

United Natural Foods vice president of policy and industry relations Melody Meyer said it was positive to see so many members of the organic community come out to participate in last week's event, but believed the decision left the sector "deeply divided".

"I was present in Jacksonville to witness one of the most divided NOSB meetings to date. I believe they made the right decision not to prohibit these out-of-soil production methods," she said.

"It would have put hundreds of growers out of business, taken valuable supply away from organic consumers and squelched innovation in our movement."

Meanwhile, the head of the Recirculating Farms Coalition, which represents hydroponic and aquaponic growers, also believed the NOSB had made the right decision in not prohibiting the two production methods.

The entity's executive director Marianne Cufone said that as many products from these farms already carried a USDA Organic label, it would have been "irresponsible and confusing" for consumers and farmers to withdraw it now.

"By siding with current science and recognizing that existing law purposely leaves the door open for various farming methods, the NOSB is sending a critical message that sustainability and innovation are valuable in U.S. agriculture," she said in a statement.

"These goals are at the center of the nationwide local food movement and spur growth of urban and rural farms alike, by a wide range of people. Inclusiveness is important in our food system.

"The Board did vote to prohibit use of aeroponics in USDA Organic production and indicated they would discuss what type of label hydroponic and aquaponic USDA Organic certified products would display."

The financial factor?

In support of the motions to ban the three production methods, Mark Kastel of farm policy watchdog group the Cornucopia Institute said the industry had effectively created "two organic labels".

"One label is all about integrity and production and that impacts the nutritional flavor and quality of the food (found at farmers' markets, CSAs, co-ops and other local retailers). The other is all about profit," he said.

"What has made the organic industry financially attractive is the fact that consumers are willing to pay a premium for food produced to a different environmental and animal husbandry model."

He also believed that part of the "organic story" had been about economic justice for family farmers, and that industrial-scale hydroponic production is a stark disconnect from that.

"The industry, in throwing their weight around the regulatory arena at the USDA, in appealing to Congress when that doesn't work, is poised to kill the golden goose. A loss of consumer goodwill will impact all players, large and small - growers, distributors and retailers."

The Cornucopia Institute is now engaging with its outside legal counsel to investigate filing a federal lawsuit, he said.

Dave Chapman, a longtime organic tomato grower with a farm in Vermont, said he was "dismayed" by the result of the vote and that it was a "great disappointment".

"The fact that it was a close vote is a sign of how much the whole process of the National Organic Program has been compromised. It should have been consensus that hydroponics should not be certified as organic," he said.

"That was the last vote of the same body seven years earlier when there was just one descending vote. What happened in seven years that suddenly reversed the definition of organic? I would say what happened was a lot of money.

"There was no new scientific evidence. I think the market was invaded by some large companies that were making hundreds of millions of dollars and that is what changed the conversation."

Chapman also emphasized that the organic movement and the NOP were two different things, and believed last week's vote may result in some profound changes in the future.

"I think that this vote was basically the beginning of divorce proceedings. The NOP is of course going to continue, and the organic movement is going to continue, but I think they're not going to continue together.

"If consumers become aware that most of the tomatoes - and soon I suspect most of the berries, cucumbers, pepper, lettuce and basil - they're buying in the store that's certified organic is in fact hydroponic, they're going to become further disheartened and stop using organic certification for the basis of how they find good food to buy.

"I think that most likely we will see the creation of one or many alternative labels to the USDA, because the USDA is failing. Of course, this is going to be a lot of work and very

confusing, but I really don't know what other choice there is."

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