

The legal battle over whether hydroponic farms can qualify for the certified organic label appears over for now: The soil-less growers will continue to qualify for the coveted—and profitable—designation, thanks to a new federal court ruling late last week.

US District Judge Richard Seeborg on Friday ruled against a coalition, led by an advocacy group called the Center for Food Safety, that had asked the court to bar hydroponic farms from being certified organic by the US Department of Agriculture, [Modern Farmer](#) reports.

The ruling, however, did not try to answer the question of whether such growers should be considered organic but only whether the USDA is within its rights to deem them so.

The two sides reacted to the news as one would expect. The Coalition for Sustainable Organics, which represents hydroponic growers, issued a statement declaring itself “ecstatic.” Meanwhile, plaintiffs such as Long Wind Farm’s Dave Chapman offered one of their own calling the decision “a sad note in the song of our democracy.”

The plaintiffs’ case centered on a provision in the Organic Foods Protection Act of 1990 that requires organic farmers to “foster soil fertility,” something hydroponic growers pretty much by definition don’t do. But the USDA has long maintained that specific requirement applies only to farmers who use soil—not those who don’t—and the agency has certified dozens of soil-less hydroponic operations as organic over the years.

The Center for Food Safety and a group of traditional organic farmers formally asked the USDA to stop the practice back in 2019 and, when the agency rejected that petition, the Center filed its lawsuit in March of last year.

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