

Miles McEvoy: Organic Marketing Is Losing A Key Government Advocate



By Hank Campbell — September 12, 2017



Miles McEvoy smelling dirt. Credit: United Natural Foods

For the last 17 years, the United States government has given organic food corporations a key ally within their halls. But things may get a little more difficult now that Miles McEvoy, deputy administrator of USDA's National Organic Program (NOP), is stepping down.

If you are not aware, organic food has long had its own special section inside USDA - the National Organic Standards Board.**(1)** In the 1990 Farm Bill was a then-obscure handout for the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. It created a National Organic Program under USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to define organic farming practices and create a list of organic production inputs so food could claim it "Meets USDA Organic Requirements." it was such an afterthought [the budget allocated was only \\$120,000](#) ^[1].

How things have changed. Today, their budget is 80X the original one and that is to manage 80 certifying agents. What qualifies as "organic" is literally picked by organic industry lobbyists, friendly believers on a "citizen" panel, and overt evangelists like McEvoy. And they have done well, directly leading to a \$120,000,000,000 worldwide industry.**(2)** Their deft advocacy is also why there are dozens and dozens of exemptions that allow for synthetic ingredients and chemicals while still being labeled organic. And then a blanket exemption, where synthetic compounds can be used if there is no "organic" version. It's why clearly non-organic compounds like pheromones on fruit crops as pesticides and animal vaccines get a hypocritical free pass.**(3)** You can grow organic food with *no soil* in plastic containers and still be called organic. Guiding the industry through such rationalization during the organic food boom has been McEvoy.

The creation of this group was the work of organic industry lobbyists, and at the time it was harmless. Organic was just a niche process and they wanted the stamp of government legitimacy. If kosher food organizations had done similar work they might also have their own fiefdom inside USDA as well. They might also have ballooned into a Big Food juggernaut the same way because both say they are superior for the body and the soul.

The NOP is really the biggest reason why that process has had such a dramatic increase in revenue and they can and will thank McEvoy. He has been their greatest Apostle. While organizations like Organic Consumers Association, an industry front-group, gnash teeth and wrend garments if anyone in government is remotely supportive of science within EPA or USDA, they roll out press releases when McEvoy or others issue platitudes about [what Politico journalist Helena Bottemiller Evich termed "kumbaya organics"](#) [2]: "We will be much more successful if we support each other as we confront challenges of water availability and climate change. We will be more successful if we treat each other with respect and dignity."

"Respect and dignity" from NOP - except for conventional farmers and scientists

I think they do treat each other with respect and dignity, it is scientists and conventional farmers they smear. And they lie to their customers, letting organic marketing groups suggest their food contains no chemicals, like pesticides or fertilizer, [and around 80 percent even think organic food has no DNA](#) [3]. For being wealthy elites that self-identify as being more educated, they have a shocking lack of knowledge about agriculture. Their customers don't know that only 5 percent of farms claiming to be organic will get tested. That means they could go up to 19 years just fabricating claims and not get caught. If they claim to be a small farm they can say they are organic without any certification at all.

How capable is NOP and NOSB of managing such a large food segment? McEvoy bragged that the organic revenue boom occurred even as his program's funding remained "flat." **(4)** Why would their budget need to go up? There is no enforcement for organic food standards, which is why foreign companies were able to just slap an organic sticker on boxes and get them into Whole Foods. No one cares about anything more than the sticker - except consumers after the fact, who rightfully felt cheated because they were paying 40-50 percent more for the same food. But they kept buying it even though there is still no surprise spot testing of organic farms, a farmer can grow organic and conventional food side-by-side, the only difference being the pesticide used. Consumers have no way to know if it was grown using copper sulphate or glyphosate.

And though they have spent ridiculous amounts of money trying to get warning labels on the products of their competitors, organic marketing groups shut down the conversation **(5)** when it comes to what chemicals are used in their process, or how many strains of their organic food were created using genetic modification techniques like mutagenesis.

Will USDA put a check on organic marketing now?

Most people do not realize that USDA, which is responsible for food safety and quality, has been kept at arm's length from organic food by McVey and NOP. **(6)** Yes, when someone gets ill due to having feces on their organic food, it will get recalled, but compared to regular food oversight is really lax. The rest of USDA believes it should monitor organic food the same way it monitors the

rest of agriculture, and not let them do it themselves. When NOSB was rechartered in 2014, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack made sure to reaffirm that it is a *time-limited* Advisory Board. Activist groups and companies, including the companies who have employees on NOSB, were enraged. They think NOSB should be "independent" of USDA.

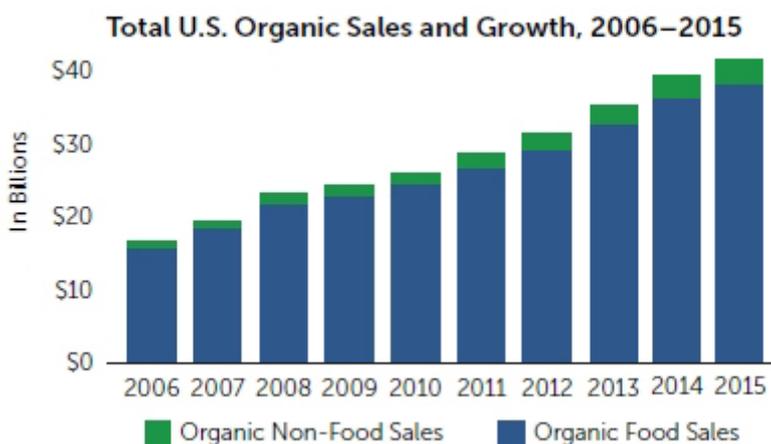
Let that sink in. Activists and organic corporations control the panel and [don't want USDA involved in determining what organic claims should be](#) [4]. So they got other groups, on whose advisory boards NOSB panelists also sit, to petition USDA to remove organic food from USDA control. Center for Food Safety, Organic Consumers Association, Food & Water Watch, it was a cornucopia of environmental sue-and-settle groups, industry flacks and paid shells for corporations all mobilized around the same agenda.

What is missing from all of those groups? A scientist who can show that organic food is better for any group outside shareholders at the organic companies benefiting from a government created health halo.

NOTES

(1) On the NOSB are an employee in a state organic sticker certification group, an ecologist, a MOM's Organic Market employee, reps from two organic food processing corporations (e.g. Clif bar), employees of four organic farms, and employees from *six* anti-science activist groups - including a naturopath whose Ph.D. was in college administration. They get five-year terms. It's odd that an employee of Beyond Pesticides, who also is on the Board of US Right To Know, an industry front group, could be on a government organic board certifying organic pesticides while raising money from organic corporations suggesting that the produce of his clients has no pesticides.

(2) The US is nearly \$50 billion of it. Here is a 10-year snapshot through 2015.



Source: *Organic Trade Association, which really just asks organic farmers how much money they made.*

(3) Baking soda. Sorry, not organic. But good luck making organic bread without that synthetic compound. And carrageenan is not only entirely synthetically processed, it contains low molecular-weight poligeenan. Anti-science groups insist it is carcinogenic. They can use xanthan gum

instead of caregeenan, though that is scientifically created by biologically changing sugar and mixing it with isopropyl alcohol. Then it is used in factories and in cosmetics along with food. But it's allowable under organic standards.

(4) Only a bureaucrat could say that with a straight face. They went from \$6.9 million in 2012 to over \$9 million in 2014. Every private sector executive would be happy with that revenue increase, but to an organic food official that is flat.

(5) Literally. When Food Chain organic-friendly radio host Michael Olson saw his organic trade group guest was flummoxed by my question wondering why she insisted that organic consumers don't want to know what pesticides are used on organic food, he literally interrupted me and went to an emergency commercial break, muted me, and talked to her about where to go next. He forgot to mute them.

(6) Some think he has not done enough. The radical Cornucopia Institute claims McVey was "under investigation" for being too cozy with "corporate agribusiness." The investigation was solely by them and pretty much consisted of pictures of organic farms that were too big, in their opinion. They also signed the petition to make NOSB independent. Before that they had lauded McEvoy as a "true believer" in their food religion because he was once an organic food inspector in Washington State.

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Links

[1] <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/7/6501>

[2] <http://www.politico.com/tipsheets/morning-agriculture/2017/09/12/northeast-dairy-farmers-losing-milk-contracts-222229>

[3] <http://agecon.okstate.edu/faculty/publications/4975.pdf>

[4] <http://www.sciencecodex.com/node/190378>