

USDA's National Organic Program Won't Answer Questions About Organic Food



By Alex Berezow — October 26, 2018



USDA

Organic food has been in the news a lot, lately.

Last week, researchers made the absurdly implausible claim that [eating organic food cuts a person's risk of cancer](#) [1]. And a few days before that, farmers were caught in a [multimillion-dollar fraud](#) [2] peddling conventionally grown food as organically certified.

Given the sheer amount of nonsense that always seems to encircle the organic industry, I reached out to the USDA's National Organic Program, which regulates the industry. Somewhat to my surprise, the National Organic Program doesn't answer questions about organic food.

USDA's National Organic Program Won't Answer Three Simple Questions About Organic Food

Below is an email inquiry I sent to the USDA's NOP:

Dear NOP:

I'm Alex Berezow, a science writer. I am inquiring about a case of food fraud in which three Nebraska farmers plead guilty to selling conventional crops as organically certified.

<https://www.morningagclips.com/farmers-plead-guilty-in-organic-grain-fraud-scheme/> ^[3]

My questions:

1) Do you know how these farmers were able to get away with this fraud for so long (7 years)?

2) Does the National Organic Program conduct routine, unannounced field testing to determine if organic farmers are following all the rules? On average, how often is a farm inspected?

3) Are there any concerns that organic food imports from China or other countries aren't actually organic? Is NOP doing anything to ensure that these foods adhere to organic rules?

Thanks.

I received a reply from a spokesperson who was responding on behalf of Dr. Jennifer Tucker, Deputy Administrator for the National Organic Program. It was full of non-answers and trite bureaucratese*.

Dr. Tucker refused to answer question #1, because "[w]e cannot comment on litigation."

She only responded to half of question #2: "USDA certified organic operations are inspected by USDA-authorized agents every year." Of course, that's not particularly useful if the USDA doesn't do surprise inspections, as is often the case for OSHA or public health inspections. In a follow-up email, I gave them the opportunity to respond to this jaw-dropping [report](#) ^[4] from the *Washington Post*:

"[T]he [organic food] system suffers from multiple weaknesses in enforcement: Farmers hire their own inspection companies; most inspections are announced days or weeks in advance and lack the element of surprise; and testing for pesticides is the exception rather than the rule."

She did not respond.

Likewise, Dr. Tucker didn't bother to answer question #3 about the integrity of imported organic food, particularly that from China, which brazenly flouts the rules of organic agriculture.

It seems clear that the USDA's National Organic Program is less of a regulatory body and more of a taxpayer-funded cheerleading squad. Given that science has shown definitively that organic food and farming have absolutely no net benefit whatsoever to society, it's time for this agency to be eliminated. Tax dollars should not be used to fund a marketing campaign.

*Note: The entire response from the National Organic Program is posted below.

Hi Alex:

Apologies for my delay in getting back to you. Our staff has been busy at the National Organic Standards Board meeting. With regards to your questions:

We cannot comment on litigation, but as others have noted, fraudulent organic food sales are the exception, not the rule.

All open cases with verifiable violations are actively pursued by our staff or referred to an appropriate enforcement partner, such as other Federal agencies or other governments, for investigation. Some of these cases involve complex supply chains and many parties may be involved at different stages. Building strong cases with deep evidence and providing due process to all parties are vital parts of any Federal investigation.

USDA certified organic operations are inspected by USDA-authorized agents every year. USDA now has more resources and robust systems in place to enforce the national organic standards and root out those who try to abuse the system. USDA has added staff, improved the intake process, utilized new technology tools and built strong partnerships with other members of the Federal enforcement family.

Working together with farmers, ranchers, certifiers, consumers and other stakeholders, we will continue to ensure the USDA Organic Seal remains the gold standard.

I hope that information is helpful. I'm happy to provide any additional information you need. Please attribute to Dr. Jennifer Tucker, Deputy Administrator for the National Organic Program.

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Links

[1] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/10/22/no-organic-food-doesnt-reduce-cancer-risk-thats-biologically-impossible-13538>

[2] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/10/12/fraud-farmers-caught-selling-conventional-crops-organic-13506>

[3] <https://www.morningagclips.com/farmers-plead-guilty-in-organic-grain-fraud-scheme/>

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/the-labels-said-organic-but-these-massive-imports-of-corn-and-soybeans-werent/2017/05/12/6d165984-2b76-11e7-a616-d7c8a68c1a66_story.html