

History of organic certification and regulation

From ideology to standards

When organic pioneers such as Rudolf Steiner, Robert Rodale, Albert Howard and Lady Eve Balfour first published their ideas on agriculture in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, it was more as an expression of ideology than an attempt to define what biodynamic or organic agriculture was. It is doubtful whether they foresaw the need for detailed legislation that today defines the minimum perch space and type of feed ingredients that allow a hen's eggs to be labelled as organic. Their interest lay in drawing attention to the biological basis of soil fertility and its links with animal and human health.

Arising from the work of such pioneers, disparate farmer groups in parts of Europe, the US and further afield developed their own ideas, which were based primarily on a commitment to a philosophy rather than a market opportunity. Acceptance as an organic producer in the 1940s and 1950s initially was based simply on becoming a member of these groups, and a declaration against the conventional sector was considered a sufficient act of commitment in itself. Informal inspections took place and loose codes of conduct were set out, but there was no pressure to define organic production systems strictly, because consumer interest was limited to the 'alternative' sector and links between producer and consumer were often close.

Voluntary standards and inspection systems began to develop independently in parts of Europe, the US and Australia. Their growth and development was organic in themselves, primarily driven by the producers and concerned consumers.

The Demeter biodynamic label grew directly out of the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and was probably the first organic label to develop. Another early attempt to define organic production came from the Soil Association, the charity that Lady Eve Balfour founded in 1946. The Association published its first standards in 1967, primarily as a means of protecting the consumer and the genuine organic farmer from bogus claims. Farmers were invited to register their farms with the Soil Association and sign a declaration that they would abide by these guidelines. On-site inspection to verify that farmers met the standards did not commence until the mid-1970s, and with this, the first organic seals were born. At the time the market for organic food was small, and neither trading standards officers nor legislators took an interest in what constituted an organic product.

Certification

During the 1970s, groups of farmers in different parts of the US began to embody the principles of organic farming in standards. Some of these groups developed their own certification systems to assure buyers that products labelled as organic were produced according to their standards. One of these groups, California Certified Organic Farmers, began certifying organic farmers in the 1970s. In the eastern US, small organisations grew up under the umbrella of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, certification organisations were developed across the board. Many of the early certification programmes developed as producer/consumer groups and some (Soil Association, California Certified Organic Farmers) retain this balance today. Most of these organisations were engaged in several other activities besides certification. The professional certification functions were normally not fully developed.

In the mid-1980s several more specialised organisations dedicated to certification started, such as Skal (Netherlands), KRAV (Sweden), and Farm Verified Organic (US). Finally, with the advent of regulations in Europe and elsewhere, in the 1990s organic certification became of interest for commercially driven certification companies.

As more certifying bodies developed, the private organic community recognised the need to co-ordinate the work of these standards organisations. The principles were defined by the various producer organisations through consultation with their members. Characteristically, this resulted in splits in the movement, which led to different standards being developed even within countries, let alone across the world. Given the complexity of farming systems and the wide variation in agroecological and social conditions that influence them, this seems hardly surprising. It is perhaps more surprising that by the end of the 1990s there was broad global understanding and agreement regarding what constitutes organic food production and processing. This achievement can largely be credited to IFOAM, a non-governmental organisation founded in 1972 in response to the increasing global interest in organic agriculture.

IFOAM is quite properly seen as representing the organic movement world-wide. Its mission is to enable the exchange of information and ideas and to foster co-operation across cultural, language and geographic barriers. IFOAM published its understanding of Organic Standards in 1980 and has continued to revise them biennially ever since. IFOAM's Basic Standards and the IFOAM Accreditation Programme are generally respected as the international guideline from which national standards and inspection systems may be built, and have been used extensively as a reference by standard-setters and legislators.

Emerging regulations

In the US the states of Oregon and California adopted organic legislation by the 1970s. But until well into the 1980s, most state governments took little notice of the developing organic movement, generally considering it to be a quaint sideshow to the real business of 'agriculture based on science'.

As organic products began to be sold by more mainstream retailers in Europe and the US in the 1980s and trade started to increase across borders, the authorities became more interested in the regulation of the market and concerned about the potential for fraudulent claims and confusion in the consumers mind of what constituted organic. In most cases the organic sector itself turned to governments for legislation.

In the US, the Organic Foods Production Act was passed in 1990. The development of the full National Organic Program proved to be very difficult and time consuming, and at times there has been major differences between the organic movement and the US Department of Agriculture. In December 2000, the USDA released final regulations for organic foods, which will take effect in October 2002.

In Europe, Regulation 2092/91, covering the labelling of organic foods, was adopted in 1991. Although not the world's first such legislation (France, Spain, and Denmark already had legislation, as did some US states), it probably has had the most far-reaching consequences to date on the organic movement. This significant impact has resulted from the combined effect of it being the first regional, statutory definition and the fact that Europe represents one of the largest markets for organic produce. Businesses, both inside and outside Europe, had to comply if they wanted to sell within or into the European market.

On the international level, governments have co-operated to develop the Codex Alimentarius guidelines for organic agriculture since 1992. Codex Alimentarius is a joint FAO/WHO commission for food standards. The Codex Alimentarius guidelines were finally adopted in 1999.

From ideology to legislation

1924	Rudolf Steiner lectures on agriculture
1924	Demeter biodynamic label founded
1940	Sir Albert Howard publishes <i>An Agricultural Testament</i>
1942	J.I. Rodale publishes the first issue of <i>Organic Farming and Gardening</i>
1943	Lady Eve Balfour publishes <i>The Living Soil</i>
1946	Soil Association founded in UK
1967	Soil Association publishes first organic standards
1972	Founding of IFOAM

1974	Oregon State (US) adopts legislation
1979	First California Organic Foods Act adopted
1980	IFOAM Basic Standards published
1985	France adopts legislation
1990	Organic Foods Production Act passed in US
1991	EU Regulation 2092/91 adopted
1992	Establishment of the IFOAM Accreditation Programme
1999	Codex Alimentarius guidelines adopted
1999	EU organic livestock regulation published
2000	Japanese organic regulation published
2000	US national organic standards published
2002	US National Organic Programme in force

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