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WSJ story relevance questioned by Organic Trade Association

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In its Dec. 9 edition, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is having difficulty monitoring the more than 25,000 farms and other organizations that sell organic crops and livestock because of the tripling in the size of that sector over the past decade.

WSJ noted that there are currently 81 accredited agents or groups that can certify food as organic under the USDA's National Organic Program. But the newspaper reported that "of the 37 that had a complete review this year, 23 were cited for failing to correctly enforce certification requirements on farms in audits, according to an internal Agriculture Department report."

WSJ added that the USDA report found that the 23 firms "didn't properly conduct onsite inspections or correctly review applications for certifications...."

In a separate *Wall Street Journal* investigation of USDA inspection records, WSJ found that since 2005 "38 of the 81 certifying agents failed on at least one occasion to uphold basic Agriculture Department standards."

Laura Batcha, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, headquartered in Washington, DC, didn't dispute the findings of the audits, but does not believe they are cause for concern.

She told *The Produce News* that by their very nature, third-party audits are designed to find inconsistencies and correct them. With regard to the NOP audits, Batcha said one major goal is to make sure all certifying agents are performing their duties in a consistent manner and members of the organic community are being judged by the same standards no matter where the certification is taking place.

Batcha has reviewed the information that the WSJ story was based on and said in some cases it was data more than five years old. And in many instances the failures were administrative in nature.

She believes that no time in the history of the National Organic Program has the USDA been in a better position to provide oversight of the certifying agents. The organic industry, she said, has successfully lobbied for increased funding to both certify and audit the certifiers as the industry has grown.

Of more concern, Batcha said, would be a third-party audit that found no areas that need correcting. She said there have been significant changes to the NOP over the years and it is understandable that many certifiers would have deficient areas discovered during an audit.

Batcha said trust in the USDA's stamp of organic certification is essential and she does not believe that trust has been compromised or misplaced. She indicated that, by and large, the certifying agents are doing a great job and applying the standards uniformly across the country.

She called the WSJ story and the information that it was based on a "snapshot in time" that in some cases reflected information that was five years old, and reiterated that she has no doubt that product being sold across the country with the USDA organic certification meets the standards of the National Organic Program.

The WSJ story did quote the USDA as making the same points as the OTA executive. The story stated that the "USDA said it requires certifiers to comply with numerous requirements, and the problems found by the Journal and the agency's internal report reflected 'a very rigorous accreditation process that requires full compliance and correction of identified issues.' Those that fall out of compliance, like the 23 cited this year, get the opportunity to correct the problem, but are at risk of being removed from the certification program if the problem isn't fixed."

WSJ noted that the USDA said its certifiers were in compliance with 97 percent of its regulations.

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