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CEA organic certification still a divisive topic

By

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The organic certification of fruits and vegetables grown in indoors has long been a festering issue in the organic sector and was the subject of a workshop session at the recent [Organic Produce Summit](#), held in Monterey, CA, July 13-14.

While the concept generates strong emotions, especially from traditional in-the-dirt growers, it has largely been settled law for three decades. Opponents of organic certification have not been successful in having Controlled Environment Agriculture declared a prohibitive practice through regulatory channels, but they are still fighting the issue in the courts.

The OPS session — “Hydroponics: To Soil or Not to Soil?” — only featured proponents of organic certification as moderator Todd Linsky, of the podcast Todd-versations, reported that the opponents scheduled to appear decided not to come. Linsky was clearly a proponent as he described the lawsuit as a “catchall” for the diversification of organic growing systems. He noted that the plaintiffs in the lawsuit — the Center for Food Safety and a cadre of traditional growers — are intent on prohibiting all fruits and vegetables from organic certification “if it’s not grown in the crust of the earth.” He believes container farming is just as vulnerable as hydroponics, as the stroke of a judge’s pen could go against previous regulatory rulings and outlaw the practice for organic certification. Linsky reported that the case is currently in an appeals court after the plaintiffs lost the first round in a lower court.

Lee Frankel, executive director for the Coalition for Sustainable Organics, a group that advocates for CEA organic certification, believes it is an issue of allowing vs. preventing innovation. He argues that traditional farmers simply want to eliminate competition by forcing all growers to farm in the same old-fashioned way without allowing for the development of innovative farming systems that can deliver organic produce in a more efficient fashion.

CEA farming has revolutionized the production of more than a handful of crops, including tomatoes, cucumber, Bell peppers, mushrooms, spouts and living herbs. The advancements in greenhouse farming techniques have led to many new ag sectors, with the category now including hydroponic, vertical farming and greenhouse production in containers, as well as other cutting-edge ideas in the developmental stage. Along the way, these indoor growers can qualify for organic certification under the rules of the National Organic Program. The operable regulation allows for organic certification for these farming operations as long as they are not employing prohibitive practices and qualify for certification in every other way, such as only using approved inputs.

Frankel said the lawsuit focuses on prohibiting the practice of indoor farming. Though proponents of that viewpoint were not in attendance, the argument revolves around the concept in the NOP that says for organic farming operations to be certified, their farming practices must improve the soil. The simple argument is that if you don’t use crust of the earth soil, by definition, you can’t improve it.

Throughout the session, Frankel continually argued that organic farmers must retain the ability to invest in enhanced farming practices without fear that those innovations will be rendered illegal for organic certification. He also added that a successful lawsuit will render the regulatory process useless. “We want to make sure organic systems stay open to innovations and the regulatory system stays in place,” he said.

Also speaking in favor of organic certification was Karen Archipley, co-founder of Archi’s Acres and co-CEO of Archi’s Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. Karen and Colin Archipley founded their farm and organization with the dual purpose of producing greenhouse-grown organic crops and offering farming opportunities to military veterans. The couple use their farm as a classroom to teach returning veterans to not only farm, but to farm utilizing sustainable practices that qualify for organic certification.

She noted that the techniques utilize 90 percent less water than in-ground crops and can produce seven to eight times the production on the same piece of land. She said a successful lawsuit would create a roadblock for increasing organic production. “We want to live in a world where organics is the norm,” she said, indicating that impediments to certification are not helpful in reaching that goal.

She noted that Archi’s Institute is educating “120 new farmers every year and we are proud of that.”

She expressed dismay that a segment of the organic community is working against the opportunity to increase organic production that would give access to so many more people. “We should all be working together,” she said. “There’s room for everyone.”

Archipley also took a shot across the bow of national agricultural organizations that are not getting involved in the fight, indicating many are sitting on the sidelines. She did not list which associations she was specifically talking about. “Where are the trade organizations,” she asked rhetorically. “I’m not impressed.”

She said if no organization was willing to step forward to represent organic growers concerning this major issue, it might be time “to create a trade organization that pulls us together.”

Frankel commented on that same theme, opining that many of the nation’s largest organic greenhouse operators have seats on the boards of those trade associations and are seeing their production techniques threatened by this lawsuit. “What’s the disconnect,” he said. “Why aren’t the national organization getting involved?”

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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