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PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

Full Court Press

US Department Of Agriculture Is Sued Over Controversial Organic Rule Change

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

The organic agricultural industry is not pleased with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Fifteen organic stakeholders announced last week that they have filed a joint lawsuit in federal court against the USDA over a procedures change in how chemicals are handled in the production and processing of organic foods. The basis of the lawsuit is that the USDA made the rule change illegally.

“This is a foundational lawsuit, which will impel the USDA to obey the law,” said Jim Gerritsen, president of the one of the plaintiffs, Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association in Washington, Maine. “It is important that the organic community maintains its historical role of protecting the integrity of the organic industry.”

Other plaintiffs include: Beyond Pesticides and Food and Water Watch, both in Washington, D.C.; Center for Food Safety in San Francisco; Equal Exchange in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts; Frey Vineyards in Redwood Valley, California; La Montanita Co-op in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association in Unity, Maine; New Natives in Freedom, California; Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance in Deerfield, Massachusetts; Northeast Organic Farmers Association in Barre, Massachusetts; Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association in Columbus, Ohio; Organic Consumers Association in Finland, Minnesota; PCC Natural Markets in Seattle; and The Cornucopia Institute in Cornucopia, Wisconsin.

The Center for Food Safety is providing counsel. The USDA rule change affects major policy within organic standards, the plaintiffs maintain, and was done without a public process. This move by the USDA violates one of the foundational principles of the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 - that being the requirement of public participation in organic policy-making, a crucial element in continued public trust in the USDA organic label.

“It is a departure from the public process that we have built as a community,” according to a joint statement issued by the plaintiffs. “This process has created a unique opportunity within government for a community of stakeholders to come together, hear all points of view and chart a course for the future

of organic. It is a process that continually strengthens organic, supports its rapid growth and builds the integrity of the USDA certified label in the marketplace.”

In adopting the Act, Congress created standards of organic certification and established a National Organic Standards Board to oversee the allowance of synthetic materials based on the determination that they do not cause harm to human health and the environment, and are necessary for the production or processing of organic food due to lack of alternatives. By law, a review of these materials takes place every five years.

At issue is a rule that implement’s the organic law’s sunset policy, which requires that all allowable materials on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances be delisted every five years unless the Board approves by a majority vote to relist them. In making the decision as to whether to relist the materials, the Board is charged with considering public input, new scientific findings and new available alternatives.

In September 2013, without public consideration, the USDA announced an immediate rule change that would allow materials to remain on the National List in perpetuity unless the Board takes initiative to vote it off.

“Perhaps the most alarming part of this sunset policy announcement was the decision by the agency to not subject this substantive policy change to full notice and comment rule-making,” according to a letter by U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) and U.S. Rep. Peter De Fazio (D-Oregon) dated April 24, 2014, available from The Cornucopia Institute. “Had the agency engaged in a full rule-making process for the policy change, it would have given the [U.S. Agriculture] Secretary the benefit of hearing about the strong objections to this change from the public, from many in the affected organic community and from members of Congress, such as ourselves.”

Because of the departure in the typical notice, comment period and rule-making procedure, the plaintiffs feel they have a strong case against the USDA.

“We are deeply concerned that the organic decision-making process is being undermined by the USDA,” according to the plaintiffs’ joint statement. “Legally, the agency’s decision represents a rule change and therefore must be subject to public comment.”

Survey: Value Of SD Crops Decreased In 2014

The value of production for most crops on farms participating with the South Dakota Center for Farm/Ranch Management showed a decrease in 2014. Despite somewhat higher yields than last year, the drop in value per bushel created 15-25 percent less value.

Although representing a very small portion of the overall acres seeded by farms in the FRBM program, oats were the most profitable. The fields averaged 121 bu/acre with an average price of \$2.90. Most fields also produced straw or aftermath grazing. These factors teamed with substantially lower input costs propelled the oats to be the highest returning crop with a return over all costs of \$87/acre. Winter wheat had a 35 percent increase in yield and showed a return over all costs of \$83 per acre, despite an average price \$1.40 lower than 2013. Both of these crops are small players in the total planted acres across the state, but certainly show their worth in a rotation.

Soybeans outperformed corn even though they had a 24 percent decrease in value per bushel. Soybeans, with their lower input costs of \$337/acre, had a return of \$64/acre. Yields averaged just under 50 bu/acre compared to 43.5 in 2013. Corn yields showed little change from last year, but average prices were down 14 percent at \$3.30/bushel. The total cost of production was \$495/acre, thus creating a net return of only \$19 per acre.

“Fortunately, we’ve seen stability with our corn input costs with a \$5 reduction in cost per acre than last year, ending the trend of steady increases. The mindset has changed to not applying every possible resource seeking the highest yield is taking place” comments FRBM instructor Will Walter.

After an astonishing \$411 return per acre in 2011, lower prices and higher input costs per acre (\$393 in 2011 to \$500 in 2013) have brought us to the \$19 return/acre last year.

“Despite the average return being positive, numerous fields actually lost money in 2014. I try to encourage producers to calculate the benefit of some of the extra products that we’ve applied in the past when it now takes more bushels of yield to recover the cost. Land costs have substantially increased since 2011 and often take several years to adjust to the reality of the marketplace. Knowing your costs is very important, as it establishes a target for crop insurance coverage and disciplined marketing plans,” added Walter.

Alfalfa had reduced profits as well in 2014. Lower yields and prices both accounted for this. Walter attributes the cold and dry weather during early spring to deterring the first cutting’s growth and heavy rainfall later that affected the quality of the crop. “It’s pretty hard to get just the right amount of rain at just the right time, thus the farmer’s reliance on hope and faith.”

More information on the 2014 South Dakota Annual Report will be released soon on the South Dakota Center for Farm/Ranch Management’s website at www.sdcfm.com or by contacting the Center at 605-995-7196 or sdcfm@mitchelltech.edu.

Maintaining Bull Fertility Through Breeding Season

BY JAKE GEIS, DVM
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When the rush of calving season finally settles down, we have a short break until we move into a season that’s a little easier on the cattlemen—breeding season. After doing nothing but increasing the feed bill for the last ten months, the bulls finally get turned out to do that job we hired them for. Because so much is riding on the bulls doing their job successfully, cattlemen often question what practices or events can have a negative impact a bull’s fertility. These questions arise from diverse areas such as medications, weather events, or infectious disease.

These questions are irrelevant if bulls are not tested for fertility before breeding season begins. A few weeks prior to breeding season, assure the bulls’ fertility through a veterinary breeding soundness exam. During this exam, commonly called a “semen test”, a veterinarian will look at the entirety of the bull’s reproductive system, as well as collect a semen sample which is viewed under a microscope. Without a valid semen test, there is no way to assess a bull’s fertility. Just because a bull looks healthy and strong there is no guarantee he is capable of breeding a cow.



Jake
GEIS

Once bulls have been shown fertile, we can explore ways to keep them fertile through breeding season. A popular concern is various medications will cause bull sterility. I’ve received questions about sodium iodide, used to treat lump jaw, LA 200, and pour-ons, like Ivomec, Dectomax or Cydectin. Current research has shown these medications have no effect on bull fertility and can be used during breeding season. It is a bad idea to delay treatment of a bull because of medication fears, as the illness can cause a grievous effect on fertility.

One class of medications that have received a lot of press are pyrethroids, which are used for fly control. A March 2012 article in *Beef* magazine suggested pyrethroids may cause sperm defects. However, the article did not cite any controlled studies. A study done in response by the University of Illinois did not find any sperm defects in cattle treated with common commercial pyrethroid

products at label doses. It is suspected that over-exposure to pyrethroids would be the main culprit for sperm defects, consequently it is important to follow the labelled dose when using these products.

Medications are not the biggest cause of bull infertility. That title goes to environment and nutrition. Cold, wet weather can lead to permanent changes in fertility. This typically occurs in March when the wet snows occur, therefore it is important to have a dry place for the bulls to lie down. Hot humid weather can cause sperm abnormalities as well, since the testicles cannot properly cool themselves. This makes breeding cows in July a challenge.

Summer weather isn’t the only source of heat that can decrease fertility. An ill bull that runs a fever can have a temporary decrease in fertility due to the heat of his own body. Prompt treatment of bulls with antibiotics and anti-inflammatories is critical to preserve the bull’s breeding ability if he is sick during breeding season.

Bulls that are under or over-conditioned also have difficulties breeding cows. Underweight bulls get run down quickly during the breeding season and don’t cover as many cows as a well-conditioned bull. In summer

breeding, overweight bulls will spend more time in the shade trying to stay cool than out with the cows. In order to have optimal success in breeding a bull needs to be in good condition with a body condition score of five out of nine.

It is important to note that being overweight at the start of breeding season can predispose a bull to go lame. Lame bulls have difficulty jumping on the cows and consequently will not breed as well. Other sources of lameness, such as footrot or an injury, will have the same effect. A bull lame on one of his back legs is less apt to breed a cow, however, if a front or back leg has an issue it should be addressed quickly.

Having concerns about bull fertility is a good thing—without viable bulls you have no calves. If you are curious if any product or management tactic can decrease a bull’s fertility, ask your veterinarian. It’s better to have the knowledge than to have an issue at preg check time.

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