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Fight Over Synthetic Ingredients Splits Organics Community

By Amanda Griscom Little, *Grist*

What do xanthan gum, an artificial thickener, ammonium bicarbonate, a synthetic leavening agent, and ethylene, a chemical that accelerates the ripening of fruit, have in common? These and other synthetic additives commonly lurk behind that "USDA Organic" stamp of approval you see on the organic products increasingly crowding the shelves of big-box stores and boutique food shops alike.

Controversy over the use of these artificial substances in certified-organic products has been simmering within the organics community for at least three years, since the feds put national organic standards into effect in 2002, and now it's finally coming to a boil.

Last week, the Organic Trade Association, which represents mainstream producers of organic products, including Dole, Kraft, and Horizon, as well as hundreds of smaller-scale farmers and producers, provoked protest among community activists when it lobbied the Senate to attach an amendment to the 2006 agriculture appropriations bill that would make it legal for certain synthetic substances to continue to be used in the preparation, processing, and packaging of organic products that get the USDA seal.

The OTA's proposed amendment would effectively cancel out a recent federal court ruling that determined synthetics shouldn't be permitted in the processing of certified-organic products -- a ruling that industry reps argue could deal a huge blow to their bottom lines. If adopted, the OTA amendment would officially green-light the use of 38 synthetic substances (including the above-mentioned) that are already being used in the production of organic products, and in some cases would enable the U.S. Department of Agriculture to continue adding others to the list without getting feedback from the public or the National Organic Standards Board, the independent advisory group that crafted the first federal organic standards.

The Organic Consumers Association, a network of 600,000 consumers of organic products, is up in arms over the proposed amendment. Ronnie Cummins, the group's national director, is particularly concerned that it would weaken the NOSB, which he calls "the primary thing that stands between us and the corporate agribusiness takeover of the organics industry." In the past two weeks, says the nonprofit group, its members and grassroots allies

have deluged congressional offices with tens of thousands of emails and telephone calls opposing the amendment.

OTA's initial lobbying push fell short, resulting in a compromise amendment to the Senate version of the issue. This week, as the Senate and House dicker over a final bill in conference committee, OTA is continuing its efforts, hoping to get its amendment added at the 11th hour.

Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of OTA, says that while study "is a good step," it would only prolong ambiguity in the marketplace and harm organic producers. "Companies have to make decisions soon about purchasing the organic ingredients they put in [next year's] products," she says. "They will refrain from doing so if it's unclear whether they can depend on the same standards that we worked so hard to establish years ago."

William Friedman-- an attorney with the D.C.-based law firm Covington & Burling who is representing OTA, and a former vice chair of the NOSB -- argues that OK'ing continued use of the synthetic substances that have been allowed up to this point is "the only way for industry to continue offering consumers the same certified-organic products that they are purchasing today, and have been purchasing for the past three years bearing the USDA seal."

Indeed, many organic producers have grown accustomed to using these artificial additives in their processed products. Under the USDA's current rules, the organic label can be applied to a product if at least 95 percent of its ingredients are organic, and the remaining five percent can contain certain synthetic substances.

But the court ruling on "Harvey v. Veneman" earlier this year determined that the USDA rule governing which synthetic substances are permissible contradicted the original intent of the 1990 law that called for creating national organic standards. Arthur Harvey, an organic blueberry farmer in Maine, stunned industry when he won on appeal against the USDA, challenging the agency for allowing synthetics into processed foods certified as organic.

(Continued on page 2)

Harvest Blend Regular

- Jumbo Carrots
- Cucumbers
- Celery
- Spinach
- Yellow Onions
- Zucchini
- Roma Tomatoes
- Hass Avocado
- Gala Apples
- Bartlett Pears
- Bananas
- Kiwi
- Angelino Plums

See the web site for details on our other options. Produce bag contents are subject to change based on availability.

You Don't Say

"We think fast food is equivalent to pornography, nutritionally speaking." - Steve Elbert

"A bagel creation that would have my parents turning over in their graves is the oat-bran bagel with blueberries and strawberries. It's a bagel nightmare, an ill-conceived bagel form if there ever was one." - Ed Levine

"Any of us would kill a cow, rather than not have beef." - Samuel Johnson

"Old people shouldn't eat health foods. They need all the preservatives they can get." - Robert Orben

"You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline -- it helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer." - Frank Zappa

(Continued from page 1)

Were the Harvey court decision to stand, products containing the synthetic substances that have been allowed for the past three years would no longer be eligible for the full-fledged "USDA Organic" label. Instead, they could bear the claim "Made With Organic Ingredients," which can be applied to products containing a minimum of 70 percent organic ingredients. Some organic producers worry that such a downgrade for their products would mean serious financial losses, because consumers are willing to pay a premium for products with a stamp that certifies them as organic, but would be less inclined to fork over so much dough for those that merely contain organic ingredients.

Says Friedman, "Up to 90 percent of the multi-ingredient products that today bear the USDA organic seal would have to be relabeled." Most crackers, breakfast cereals, bread, milk, cheese, yogurt, tofu, bananas, lettuce, and any products containing sugar would not be able to bear the organic label, he says, because ingredients now used to make them would be prohibited by the Harvey ruling. As a result, "entire product lines would have to be eliminated," Friedman claims.

Urvashi Rangan, director of the Eco-labels.org project of Consumers Union, the nonprofit research group that publishes Consumer Reports, doesn't believe the blow would be so severe. "There has been lots of pressure to weaken standards so companies can capitalize on the synthetics market," she says. But many of the synthetic ingredients at issue, such as leavening agents, ripening agents, and thickeners, could have natural -- albeit some-

what more expensive -- counterparts, as does the carbon dioxide that is used to preserve bananas and lettuce. "We should be pushing the market to develop, cultivate, and adopt these natural processing agents and ingredients, not their cheaper artificial counterparts," she argues.

Many organic consumers would seem to agree. Says Rangan, "According to our research, 46 percent of all consumers buy organic-labeled food products, and 85 percent of all respondents say they do not expect food labeled as organic to contain artificial ingredients. In other words, allowing synthetics leads to fraudulent labeling, plain and simple, and erodes the credibility of the term organic."

Cummins characterizes the OTA's lobbying as an attack on the definition of organic, and likens it to the USDA's past efforts to dilute organic standards: "In 1997 and 1998, the department proposed that genetic engineering, food irradiation, and use of toxic sludge be permissible on organic farms," he says. And last year, the USDA made moves to allow hitherto prohibited pesticides, tainted feeds, and antibiotics in the production of organic goods.

In these cases, the organics community -- including both industry groups and consumer-advocacy groups -- rose up in a unified force against the USDA to beat back these rollbacks. What makes the current situation different is that organic adherents themselves are warring.

"I am very concerned about the fractured state of the organic community," says Jim Riddle, chair of the NOSB.

Recipes

Tomato Zucchini Skillet

- 1/2 cup sliced green onion
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 tsp vegetable oil
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 small bay leaf
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/8 tsp pepper
- 1 lb zucchini, unpeeled, sliced 1/2-inch thick
- 3 tomatoes, peeled and each cut in 8 wedges

Cook onion and garlic in oil until onion is tender. Add sugar, bay leaf, salt, pepper, and zucchini. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add tomatoes; heat through. Remove bay leaf before serving tomato zucchini recipe.

Chicken with Zucchini and Tomatoes

- 4 boneless chicken breasts
- 1/2 cup flour, seasoned with salt and pepper
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 2 small zucchini, halved and sliced
- 8 oz mushrooms, sliced
- 1/3 cup dry sherry (can use white wine or chicken broth)
- 3/4 lb roma tomatoes, diced
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella or Cheddar cheese

Dredge chicken pieces in flour mixture. Heat olive oil over medium-high heat in a heavy oven-proof skillet; add chicken pieces to hot oil. When browned, remove chicken to a plate. Sauté zucchini and mushrooms for 2 to 3 minutes. Add chicken pieces back into skillet. Pour sherry over all; cook another 4 minutes. Season with salt and pepper; top with tomatoes. Transfer the pan to a preheated 325 degree oven. Cook for about 45 minutes or until chicken is done. Top with shredded cheese just a few minutes before done.

Spinach, Kiwi and Strawberry Salad

- 1 bunch spinach, washed and torn
- 2 kiwis, peeled and sliced
- 1 qt Strawberries, hulled and sliced
- 2 tbsp sesame seeds
- 1 tbsp poppy seeds
- 1/4 cup cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup salad oil
- 1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 tsp paprika
- 4 tsp minced onion

Combine dressing ingredients together in a jar. Cover and shake well. Let stand to blend flavors. At serving time, place spinach in a salad bowl. Add kiwis and strawberries. Toss with dressing.

Spinach Salad With Pear And Avocado

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/3 cup seasoned rice vinegar
- 1 tbsp fresh lime juice
- 1 tbsp minced fresh cilantro
- 1/4 tsp garlic powder
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1 bunch spinach, washed and torn
- 1 pear, peeled, cubed
- 1 avocado, pitted, peeled, cubed
- 1/2 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup crumbled Gorgonzola cheese

Whisk first 6 ingredients in medium bowl to blend. Season to taste with salt and pepper. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before using.) Mix spinach, pear, avocado and onion in large bowl. Toss with enough dressing to coat. Sprinkle with Gorgonzola cheese. Serve, passing any remaining dressing separately.