

Cornucopia Institute: Organic farms industrializing—As sustainability benefits of GMO crops rise

The idyllic image, often promoted by the organic industry itself, of organic farming as a collection of independent farmers committed to sustainability and fighting against Big Ag is far from current reality. Sure, there are thousands of small backyard farmers and small farms, but in terms of output—what consumers buy and eat—they represent an increasingly smaller fraction of the organic market. And this analysis comes not from critics of organic farming but from its most ardent supporters.

“When people buy organic milk and eggs, they are buying the story behind the label,” Mark Kastel, co-founder of the Cornucopia Institute, told the [Washington Post](#). “We have a wonderful, romantic story. When they see the reality, they really feel betrayed.”



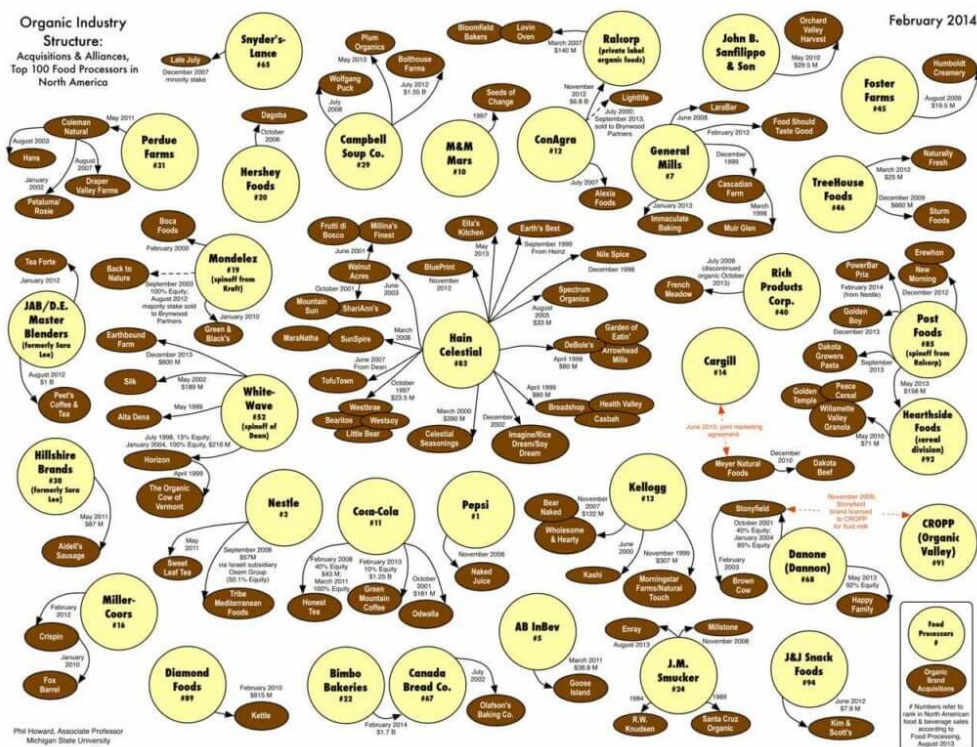
Green Meadow, Saranac, Michigan
(Cornucopia Institute)

Recently, Cornucopia took [aerial photos](#) of some of the most productive organic farms in the United States to show how little they portray that family farm image that most consumers think they’re buying when they purchase organic. For example, this photo depicts Green Meadows Farm in Saranac, Michigan, an organic animal farm that is licensed for over 1 million birds. Each of these two-story houses contains over 100,000 birds.

In an article in [The Saturday Evening Post](#), Barry Yeoman recounts the organic industry’s climb toward industrialization. After 12 years of setting standards for organic foods, including exclusion of genetically modified crops, the USDA set its official guidelines in 2002.

“From 2000 through 2008 the sector went gangbusters: Organic food sales climbed 15 to 21 percent each year, and organic non-foods like cotton were posting annual growth rates upwards of 40 percent,” he wrote.

The Cornucopia Institute created this [flow chart](#) showing corporate acquisitions of organic farms and food companies. To name a few: General Mills owns Cascadia Farms; Hillshire Brands owns Aidell’s Sausage; Coca Cola owns Honest Tea.



(Cornucopia Institute)

For some organic supporters, corporate control isn't an issue. Helge Hellberg, a California consultant, told Yeoman, "Any acre converted from non-organic production to organic—even if it's industrial—is a victory for the environment."

For others, it's a betrayal of the movement. "Part of why many of us went to organic many, many decades ago was because of the kind of concentration and difficulty we saw in the agribusiness-as-usual model," Michael Sligh, the founding chair of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), told Yeoman.

Ultimately, organic farming's need to fit into the existing model of agriculture has pushed it to concentrate on efficiency. This leads many farmers and businesses to get big to stay in the game. This flies against its early ideals of local production, animal welfare and sustainability.

This is certainly not true for every organic farmer, as some try to maintain small operations. Yeoman gives the example of Ray Christopher, who runs the 12-acre farm Timberwood Organics in Efland, N.C. Christopher was dropped as a supplier to Whole Foods Market over the higher price point of his vegetables compared to a large-scale organic farm in California.

Another conundrum that Cornucopia Institute is addressing is how many compromises have been made in the regulation of the organic industry. The group is using its aerial photos to argue that organic farmers are not meeting requirements to provide grazing for animals or even give them time outside. It is filing complaints with the USDA against 14 operations.

According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), the growth of organic food industry is stretching the USDA's ability to

monitor the industry. A recent internal memo at the agency found that 23 of 37 certifying agents that were reviewed this year did not correctly conduct onsite inspections. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation went further looking at all 81 certifying agents, finding that 38 had failed at least once to follow standards.

The organic industry is certainly not the opposite of conventional farming, as it may sometimes attempt to portray itself. Nor is it the antithesis of farmers choosing to plant genetically modified crops.

That brings us to the issue of what is sustainable agriculture. In fact, crops can be genetically modified to be more sustainable—a high value among consumers who buy or consider buying organic. In fact when the formal organic standards were being established in the 1990s, President Clinton proposed including some GM crops as organic if they improved sustainability, by say reducing insecticide use or other inputs, but they industry rejected that proposal.

If one's goal is protecting the environment and not an ideology, It make sense to support biotechnology when it offers genuine sustainability benefits—and some consumers are catching on, especially younger ones. One recent [survey](#) by the International Food Council Foundation found that millennials are more open to food biotechnology than other age groups, while they are also willing to pay more for sustainably produced foods. Consumers in the survey indicated their willingness to buy food modified by biotechnology to require fewer pesticides.

Specifically, for insect-resistant crops, such as Bt crops, pesticide use is reduced by nearly 42 percent, according to a [meta-study published in PLOS-ONE](#) in November. Bt corn contains a genetic sequence from a soil bacterium that codes for a compound that kills the European corn borer, requiring less pesticide use from the farmer.

Not to mention that one simple distinction between organic and conventional farming is sometimes just using organic rather than synthetic pesticides.

Eric Hall, a professor at the University of Minnesota, Rochester, writes on the [Skeptoid](#) blog: “We shouldn’t judge chemicals based on a “natural” label, a perceived “ickiness,” or on fear-mongering from pseudoscientists. It should be our goal to reduce the use of all pesticides and herbicides not because they are dangerous, but because reducing their use reduces the energy needed to produce the food, and could theoretically lower the cost of food as well.”

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Additional Resources:

- [Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California](#), Julie Guthman, University of California Press
- [Organic farmer call to action: We can work with GMO farmers to feed the world](#), Genetic Literacy Project
- [Organic fed animals no healthier than GMO fed ones, but gain price premium](#), Sacramento Bee
- [How to sell a toxic pesticide the smart way—call it organic](#), Genetic Literacy Project