

Should Trump scrap USDA's National Organic Program?

The “skinny” budget proposed by the White House a few weeks ago will undergo significant changes as it wends its way through the maze of congressional committees, but it’s clear that the president and his economic advisers really do want to take a scalpel to programs that are marked by waste, fraud and abuse. OMB Director Mick Mulvaney said during a March 16 [2017] press briefing that the government shouldn’t spend money on programs simply because they “sound good.”

Several programs at the Department of Agriculture would be eliminated in the president’s budget, and we suggest another — one that involves the government in providing benefits to special interests: the National Organic Program, which is subsidized to the tune of \$160 million a year and has more in common with Whole Foods’ marketing department than sound government. For example, it is charged with “protecting the integrity of the USDA organic seal, from farm to market, around the world.”

The thing is, the integrity of the organic seal has nothing to do with benefit to consumers, farmers or the environment. So what does it mean? Well, when it was established in 1990, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman emphasized the fundamental meaninglessness of the organic designation: “Let me be clear about one thing, the organic label is a marketing tool. It is not a statement about food safety. Nor is ‘organic’ a value judgment about nutrition or quality.”

[nop](#) It’s worth repeating: The organic label is no more than a marketing tool. And it’s a cynical one, because so many unsuspecting consumers are ripped off by the high prices of organic products, without palpable benefit. That’s why it should be high on the administration’s hit-list.

Organic agriculture has morphed into a massive special-interest bonanza. Annual sales of organic food in the United States now exceed \$40 billion. Federal spending on organic agriculture has mushroomed from \$20 million in the 2002 Farm Act to more than \$160 million in the 2014 Farm Act. And according to the USDA, during the Obama administration, USDA “signed five major organic trade arrangements and has helped organic stakeholders access programs that support conservation, provide access to loans and grants, fund organic research and education and mitigate pest emergencies.”

It is noteworthy that other, analogous special interests — such as the producers of kosher and halal foods — don’t receive similar government benefits. (Read: welfare.)

The definition of “organic” continues to be a movable feast while the government and organic industry constantly tweak its meaning; it is completely arbitrary, after all, with no scientific basis. In January, the industry’s primary lobbying group, the Organic Trade Association (OTA), announced a new partnership with the USDA to create yet another organic program — the “certified transitional” program — to aid farmers switching from conventional crops to organic. (They must wait 36 months before they can earn organic certification, in order that their farm is fully “decontaminated” from prohibited chemicals and practices.) “This will help ease the transition process to organic, allow farmers to sell their products as certified transitional at a premium price and help encourage more organic production,” according to the OTA.

Organic boosterism at the federal level is not without consequence. Consumers have been snookered into believing organic food is healthier, safer or better for the environment than nonorganic options although it is not. Because prices for organic food are much higher, those misconceptions eat away at the buying power of the average consumer. And while organic marketers like to promote the idea that “organic” implies “locally grown,” the United States is actually a net importer of organic goods, including organic grains from countries like China, India, Turkey and Romania, with no way to be sure those countries adhere to “organic” standards that even remotely resemble those in the United States.

Organic marketers have conned consumers into believing that organic growers don’t use pesticides (they do, and many of them are highly toxic), that organic foods are more healthful (they’re not), and that organic practices are good for the environment. (Lower crop yields are inevitable given organic farming’s systematic rejection of many advanced methods and technologies. The lower yields increase the pressure for the conversion of more land to farming and more water for irrigation, both of which are serious environmental issues.)

Their fearmongering and trashing the competition influence shoppers’ behavior, especially those with lower incomes, in an unconstructive way: A recent study published in *Nutrition Today* indicated that “limited access and availability of organic produce in low-income communities could discourage purchase of any [fruits and vegetables] when organic is not available.”

The Trump administration and the GOP-controlled Congress seem committed to making the federal government’s actions and programs more cost-effective and less politically correct. Getting taxpayers out of the culinary snake-oil business would be an important step in that direction.

A version of this article appeared at the San Diego Union-Tribune as “[Organic labeling program should be plowed under](#)” and has been republished here with permission from the authors and the original publisher.

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For more background on the Genetic Literacy Project, read [GLP on Wikipedia](#)