

Viewpoint: 'It's time for transparency' — How promoting alleged benefits of organic food misleads shoppers and undermines our farm system

Rather predictable howls of protest from organic lobbyists greeted the recent decision to allow the temporary use of neonic seed dressings on sugar beet crops this year to protect against virus yellows disease.

"It is not credible to claim an exemption is temporary or emergency when it is used year after year. How many years will bans of these harmful chemicals be overridden?" [fumed](#) the Soil Association's head of farming policy, Gareth Morgan.

"People in glass houses..." was the saying that immediately sprang to mind.

Perhaps he had temporarily forgotten that similar exemptions have been permitted year after year for organic growers to spray banned copper blight fungicides on potatoes? Or that as recently as 2020 the Soil Association [urged](#) members to lobby Defra Ministers to ignore the Expert Committee on Pesticides' scientific advice that such products pose serious environmental concerns due to their acute aquatic toxicity?

But, in truth, that is not the half of it.

A much greater hypocrisy – and one which both undermines conventional growers and misleads organic shoppers – lies in the organic industry's routine use of non-organic seed, a practice which now appears to have reached record levels.

Under an 'emergency' derogation, where equivalent organic seeds cannot be sourced, organic growers are permitted to use 100% non-organic seed, grown using the same synthetic herbicides, fungicides and fertilisers banned under organic rules, and which the organic lobby campaigns against relentlessly.



Credit: Pxhere

The resulting harvest is then marketed at a premium as 'organic'.

A couple of years ago, Cambridgeshire arable farmer Martin Jenkins – a co-author of this article – took issue with this practice after a Soil Association report entitled [Organic Farming and Growing – does it stack up?](#) claimed to show how much more profitable organic farmers are than their conventional counterparts, with organic arable farmers receiving a net income of £690/ha compared to £288/ha for non-organic.

In a [letter](#) sent directly to Defra Ministers and other prominent farming MPs, he raised concerns over the dubious practice of non-organic seed derogations, highlighting the case of [organic OSR trials](#) in Aberdeenshire, in which growers used 100% non-organic F1 hybrid seed yet still pocketed a premium of £520 per tonne over conventional for their 'organic' OSR.

This prompted Julian Sturdy MP, also an arable farmer and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science & Technology in Agriculture, to describe the practice of 100% non-organic hybrid seed use by organic growers as 'a kick in the teeth for conventional oilseed rape growers struggling with pest-ravaged crops following the loss of neonic seed treatments', as he [called for an urgent investigation](#) into the practice of non-organic seed use by organic growers.

At the time, there appeared to be some confusion over the legality of this practice, after a [written answer](#) from former Defra Minister Lord Gardiner of Kimble in response to a Parliamentary Question suggested that crops grown from 100% non-organic seed could not legally be marketed as 'organic':

"There is no certified organic farmland that uses wholly non-organic seeds, as use of organic seeds is a requirement for certification." Hansard, 30 November 2020.

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When Organic Farmers & Growers [protested](#), however, Defra subsequently issued a correction to confirm that organic growers can, in very specific circumstances, be authorised to use wholly non-organic seeds, adding that the Government was keen to work with the organic sector to reduce the need for such authorisations by improving the availability of organic seeds.

This is clearly an important issue, and the organic sector has [acknowledged](#) that continued use of non-organic seed "risks creating two-tiers of seed costs for farmers risking undermining public trust" and that "progress in organic seed breeding, production and usage is important to allow the organic sector to comply with regulatory requirements, protect public integrity and trust in organic food."

So, how is that effort progressing?

Organic sector bodies are required to produce an annual report detailing the organic industry's use of non-organic seed. The most recent [report](#), covering 2022, was quietly published last month.

For the first time, the 2022 report covers only Great Britain, rather than the United Kingdom as a whole. It shows that despite a declining trend in the total [UK organic area](#) – down from over 700 thousand hectares in 2008 to just over 500 thousand hectares in 2021 – the total number of non-organic seed authorisations issued to organic farmers increased to a record high of 17,259 in 2022. The previous high point, which also included data for Northern Ireland, was 17,101 in 2011.

Surely most shoppers paying a premium for organic produce would be blissfully unaware that so much of it had been produced from non-organic seed? One is left wondering how they would perceive this apparently routine use of non-organic inputs, and the obscene profiteering taking place at their expense?

Conversations with seed industry contacts have also revealed more about the practical challenges and barriers apparently standing in the way of the UK organic sector achieving its stated objective of “100% organic-seed-for-organic-production.”

Although it is often suggested by Defra that “the organic seed sector is not sufficiently developed to provide 100% organic seeds”, it turns out that the UK plant breeding and seeds sectors have previously held very detailed discussions with the organic industry, dating back more than a decade, in a bid to address organic growers’ seed requirements.

But those talks seemingly hit the buffers, primarily because organic growers are reluctant to pay the higher cost of certified organic seed production – estimated by the seed trade at two to three times that of conventional.

And is that any wonder, when ‘emergency’ derogations to use cheaper conventionally produced seed are easy to come by and issued annually to organic growers in the tens of thousands?

Let’s be clear. No farming system has a monopoly on the solution to feeding a hungry, warming planet sustainably, and it doesn’t usually help to pit one farm type against another.

But something must be done to address the hypocrisy and double standards at play here, and the gigantic swindle taking place not only at the expense of conventional farmers, but also of those unwitting consumers paying a hefty premium for the supposed ‘integrity’ of organic food.

On behalf of farmers and consumers, therefore, we would echo Julian Sturdy’s calls for an urgent review of how compliance with the rules on non-organic seed use is independently policed, monitored and enforced. Because it looks like the organic sector has been marking its own homework for far too long.

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Martin Jenkins is an arable farmer in Cambridgeshire who throughout his 45-year career has been passionate about protecting and enhancing the environment, and equally passionate about the application of science to improve productivity and efficiency while reducing farming’s environmental footprint.

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