

## Organic Trade Association: Lobby group under activist fire for supporting federal GMO labeling

The [Organic Trade Association](#) (OTA), the central trade group and lobby group for the organic food and farming industry, is under fire from more radical organic activists because of its support for the bi-partisan mandatory GMO labeling bill signed into law last July. Anti-GMO leaders have joined with natural and alternative product salesmen including David Bronner, Joseph Marcela and NaturalNews' Mike Adams in portraying the OTA as 'traitors' to their cause.

"OTA's leadership demonstrated a complete lack of integrity and courage in standing against the biotech agenda," wrote Bonner in a [seething commentary](#) in Huffington Post. OTA's more radical rival—the Organic Consumer's Association, which is also known for its vaccine denialism and embrace of quack homeopathic medicine, has gone so far as [organizing an effort](#) to convince organic farmers and producers to withdraw from the group. "We prefer to call it, the Organic 'Traitors' Association," OCA writes.

It's not yet clear if the divisions in the organic community pose a genuine threat to the OTA. Founded in 1985 as the Organic Foods Production Association of North America, OTA is a North American membership-based business association. Its [stated mission](#) is to promote and protect organic trade to benefit the environment, farmers, the public, and the economy. Organic products represented include organic foods, ingredients and beverages, as well as organic fibers, personal care products, pet foods, nutritional supplements, household cleaners and flowers. Today the OTA represents the interests of 8,500 member companies. Its web page is marked by Eden-like pictures of organic farming, branding itself as a 'natural' alternative to 'industrial, intensive' agriculture. [screen-shot-2016-10-11-at-9-17-35-pm](#)

Since 1998, the organization has lobbied Congress and various regulatory agencies on behalf of industry (see below for financial details). The OTA's primary vector is its regular "consumer survey" that has regularly trumpeted anti-biotech beliefs. "[A]s U.S. families are becoming increasingly aware of the presence of unlabeled genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in foods in the marketplace, they turn to organic as the food labeled by law to not have been made with genetically engineered ingredients," the OTA boasted in a [typical press release, this one from 2013](#). That news release drove hundreds of news articles and thousands of posts that ricocheted through the Internet echo chamber. That aggressive anti-GMO stance, which helped fan green hysteria about genetically engineered foods, is now coming back to haunt them

The OTA's lobbying efforts on behalf of the new federal GMO labeling bill have been specifically targeted by fringe anti-GMO activists who feel that the trade group did not stand behind its aggressive words. In a statement on OTA's website, the organization said it supported the bill because it included several provisions that its leadership felt protected and strengthened the organic [seal](#):

On the surface, we understand how some may be fundamentally dissatisfied with supporting this compromise solution because it includes an option to reveal the presence of GMOs

through technology that would require a smartphone and internet access. But it also covers more products than the Vermont Law if it goes into effect. When it comes to protecting organic agriculture and trade, we have to take the long view. If you consider what the opponents of GMO labeling proposed, and what the voluntary and state by state options would have offered, it's hard not to see how this mandatory federal legislation is a constructive solution to a complex issue.

While not perfect, this bill covers thousands more products than Vermont's GMO labeling law and other state initiatives. It will not allow products that are exempt from informing consumers about their GMO content to automatically slap on a non-GMO claim. And it makes a huge advance in recognizing and safeguarding USDA certified organic as the gold standard for transparency and non-GMO status.

Without the bill, OTA believed that the seal was at risk of being undermined by 'non-GMO' seals on non-organic products. Non-GMO labels are booming, and provide an alternative to products that go through the more rigorous organic production process. OTA said it also supported the bill because it did not believe that the 'skull-and-crossbones' labeling approach advocated by activists had any chance of passing.

However, many advocates of organic farming, as well as prominent members of the OTA, still view the Roberts-Stabenow bill as a capitulation to big biotech corporations. Bronner, president of OTA member business Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, has called OTA's reasoning "pathetic and self-serving, he [resigned](#) his company from the OTA.

In September 2016, 60 organizations called for OTA member companies to withdrawal. Signers of the letter included major anti-GMO NGOs such as Food and Water Watch (Read GLP profile [here](#)), the Organic Consumers Association (Read GLP profile [here](#)), Food Democracy Now! (Read GLP profile [here](#)), and the Center for Food Safety (Read GLP profile [here](#)). The letter's lead author was Ronnie Cummins, who is the international director of the Organic Consumers Association. According to the letter, OTA's support of the bill was to protect non-organic products made by OTA's member [companies](#):

In a purely self-serving move, OTA Executive Director Laura Batcha, and board chair Missy Hughes (who also serves as general counsel for Organic Valley), with support from Organic Valley CEO George Siemon, endorsed the Stabenow-Roberts DARK Act. Why? Because powerful members of the OTA, and multinational food corporations selling so-called "natural foods" do not want the public to know what's in their non-organic brands. And so certified organic products could make a label claim that they are GMO-free.

## HISTORY

### Organization

Organic Food Production Association of North America, aka Organic Trade Association (OTA)

28 Vernon Street, Brattleboro, VT 05301

EIN: 23-2341522

www.ota.com

Telephone: 802-275-3800

2013 revenue/expenditures = \$4.2 million/ \$4.1 million

## **Lobbying**

Since 1998, the OTA has extensively lobbied regulatory agencies. The OTA had a total of \$316,150 in [lobbying](#) expenditures for 2013. In 2012, the OTA spent a total of \$369,494 on lobbying expenditures. Between 1998-2014, the OTA invested over \$1.5 million into lobbying. Agencies typically lobbied by the OTA include U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Management and Budget, and the Food & Drug Administration.

## **Store Wars**

A 2005 campaign by OTA developed by Free Range Graphics that disparaged GMOs, pesticides, and other conventional practices via a viral video called “Grocery Store Wars” based on the Star Wars theme. The video perpetuates several common misconceptions, such as the belief GMOs are ‘unnatural’ and organic farming does not use chemicals or pesticides.

## **The Organic Center (TOC)**

A separate 501c3, The Organic Center is housed in and financed and run by the OTA. It is listed as a formal arm of OTA on IRS tax filings. OTA transferred \$105,000 to TOC in 2013. The mission of TOC is to provide free, peer-reviewed, credible science that explores the health and environmental benefits of organic agriculture and to educate people and organizations about the science that sheds light on the advantages of organic food and farming. However, the vast majority of TOC’s research is of the alleged dangers and risks of conventional farming production practices such as the use of pesticides, antibiotics, and GMOs. Organic watchdog group the Cornucopia Institute (read GLP profile [here](#)) has called TOC a “big agribusiness lobby group.”

TOC’s former scientific director is Charles Benbrook (read GLP profile [here](#)), a former ag specialist in the Department of Environmental Quality during the Carter administration and a long-time player in organic science battles through his private consultancy and affiliations with other advocacy groups. Benbrook received compensation of \$150,000 for his services to TOC in 2008 making him the highest paid staff member. Benbrook produced numerous studies over the years claiming that organic farming was more sustainable and as or more productive than conventional farming. It was later discovered that almost 100% of Benbrook’s research had been funded by the organic industry itself—disclosures that Benbrook never made. Benbrook briefly rejoined the TOC after he was let go from Washington State University as

an adjunct professor, but his name no longer appears on the organization's website.

TOC's role is to provide scientific justification for most of the organic food industry's scientific pronouncements. In 2008, TOC reported \$900,000 in revenues while reportedly staffed by just three people. In 2013 TOC reported \$420,000 in revenue and \$380,000 in expenses, with two employees paid a combined \$75,000 in salaries. By 2014 TOC listed no employees on its tax returns and no salaries paid. The staff listed on the website appear to be housed and funded by the Organic Trade Association.

## Agricultural Appropriations Act

The OTA Rider attached to the Agriculture Appropriations Act, which the USDA approved, and passed before Congress in 2006, opened the door for non-organic, non-agricultural, and synthetic additives in food products bearing the "organic" label. The Organic Consumers Association (OCA) derided the OTA's, stating, "In the broadest and most basic sense, the OTA rider takes away the organic community's leading role in setting and monitoring [organic standards](#) for processed [organic foods](#), and instead places this power in the hands of the USDA and industry."

## KEY PEOPLE

- **Laura Batcha**, CEO & executive director: Batcha joined the Organic Trade Association as director of marketing and public Relations. She was named CEO and Executive Director of OTA in January of 2014.

### Board of Directors:

- **Melissa Hughes, president:** General Counsel & Director of Government Relations for Organic Valley, the nation's largest and oldest organic dairy cooperative.
- **Kim Dietz, vice president:** senior manager of environmental, natural, and organic policy government relations & corporate sustainability for Smucker Natural Foods.
- **Sarah Bird, secretary:** CEO at Bhakti, Inc, a Colorado manufacturer of chai and sparkling teas.
- **Tony Bedard, treasurer:** chief executive officer for Iowa-based Frontier Co-op, a leading supplier of natural and organic herbs, spices and aromatherapy products under the Frontier, Simply Organic, Aura Cacia and Aura Cacia Organics brands.

## FUNDING SOURCES

Membership fees and voluntary contributions.

## Resources

- [OTA on Facebook](#)
- [OTA on Twitter](#)
- [OTA on LinkedIn](#)