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Ralliers support 'organic' standards

The USDA has been criticized for proposing broader standards for foods labeled organic

By Laura Daniel
Freelance Reporter

The definition of "organic food" may be changing soon if the USDA has its way.

But organic farmers, retailers and consumers won't make it easy. Supporters of the current high standards that need to be met to earn the label "organic" gathered together Saturday in the Downtown Plaza for the Rally for Organics.

To qualify as organic, food must be grown using only natural chemicals and techniques, with two lists of exceptions: one restricting the use of a few natural chemicals such as nicotine, and the other permitting the use of particular synthetic chemicals under specific conditions and/or circumstances.

In 1990, Congress passed the Organic Food Production Act, creating a federal law regulating organic food production, but the act lacked specific rules needed to enforce the law. The National Organic Standards Board was created to bridge the gap between the USDA and the organic food industry. The board reviews substances and practices associated with organic farming and then recommends organic growing standards to the USDA.

Organic food supporters claim these recommendations have

been ignored.

Ralliers carried signs reading "USDA wants to poison us" and "We want Earth-friendly food," which demonstrated the issue behind the rally.

"The USDA proposals are so bad a response in the form of a rally is natural," said Jan Spencer of the Organic Standards Coalition.

Many of the USDA's proposals directly contradict both the board's recommendations and the Organic Food Production Act itself. The USDA wants to allow all antibiotics for crop use, although the standards board recommended that only streptomycin and oxytetracycline be listed as allowed synthetics.

Contradictions between the board's recommendations and the USDA's proposals also lie in the definitions of key farming practices such as composting and genetic engineering.

Spencer introduced the speakers at the rally, including Rep. Peter DeFazio. DeFazio suggested that other governmental organizations, such as the EPA and Department of Commerce, put pressure on the USDA to include practices that do not meet the standards of the board. Although the director of the USDA told him that this is "not a food safety issue," DeFazio remained hope-

ful.

"Let's turn this thing around," he said.

Other speakers addressed different issues. Lynn Coody, founding president of Oregon Tilth, expressed concern about the broader implications of the proposed federal standards. The broad standards eliminate the consumer's right to buy "true organic," diminish environmental improvements in agriculture and destroy the emergence of organic food farming, she said.

Like Coody, Oregon State Rep. Kitty Piercy addressed concerns about Oregonians' rights. "This is about Oregonians being able to make decisions for Oregonians," she said.

Piercy also pointed out that the federal government generally sets the lowest standards for an industry, not the highest. "Don't tell me we can't get higher than the federal government," she said. Industries rarely ask for stricter regulations, Coody added.

The purpose of the rally was not just to inform the audience about the impending change in organic standards. DeFazio and other speakers encouraged people to contact the USDA and express their concerns about the standards by April 30.

"Don't tell me we can't get higher than the federal government."

Kitty Piercy
Oregon State Representative

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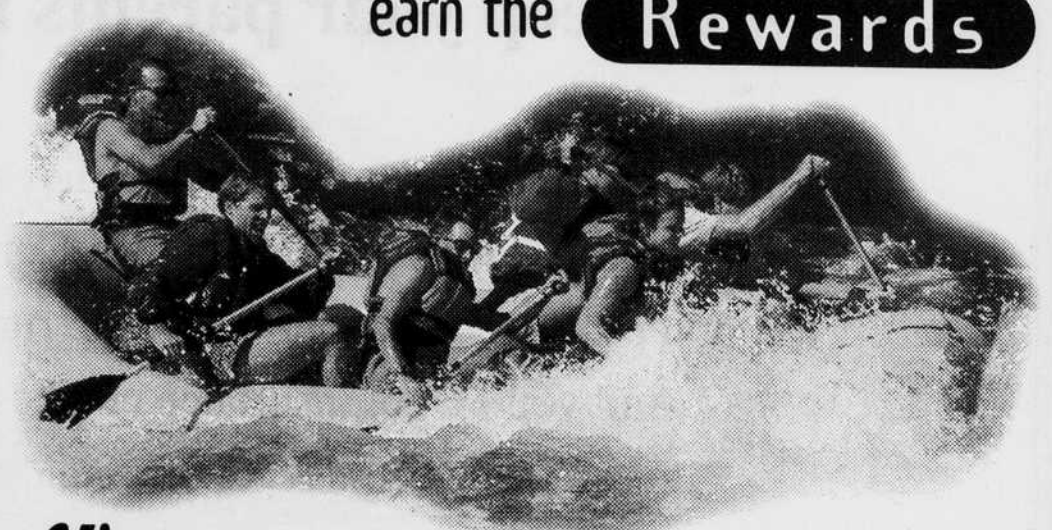
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