

People & Places

Institute ensures organic material compliance

OMRI's list of approved organic products grows to more than 6,000

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

EUGENE, Ore. — The growing consumer appetite for organic food has caused a chain reaction through the agriculture industry, all the way through to farm input suppliers.

Rising interest in organic farming has spurred the creation of new products and companies seeking to supply those growers with organic fertilizers, pesticides and other goods.

Over the past 20 years, the number of products listed for organic use by the Organic Materials Review Institute has increased from fewer than 200 to more than 6,000.

OMRI, a nonprofit based in Eugene, Ore., is charged with ensuring those crop, livestock and processing products comply with organic standards established by the USDA.

In just the last year, the number of products listed by OMRI has shot up 20 percent.

There is some confusion about the institute's role in the organic industry, said Peggy Miars, its executive director.

Companies occasionally try to convince OMRI to approve a product even though it contains a prohibited substance, not understanding the organization doesn't make such calls, she said.

OMRI doesn't decide whether it's appropriate for a substance to be allowed in organic production — that responsibility falls to the USDA's National Organic Program and an advisory group of industry stakeholders, the National Organic Standards Board.

Not an advocate

"We never advocate for or against a particular substance," said Miars.

Instead, the institute eval-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Peggy Miars, left, executive director of the Organic Materials Review Institute, and Kelsey McKee, OMRI's review program and quality director, work to ensure farm inputs and other products meet organic standards.

uates the formulations of branded products to determine if they're composed of substances that are permitted by USDA.

When a substance is proposed for inclusion in organic production, the USDA may also hire the institute to research the material's impacts on the environment and human health.

However, OMRI doesn't make recommendations and stays out of controversies about approving or prohibiting substances, said Miars.

"One reason OMRI is respected is because we are neutral," she said. "We don't go one way or another."

The vast majority of products listed by OMRI — 86 percent — pertain to growing crops, and most of those are fertilizers and soil amendments.

The remaining 14 percent are fairly evenly split between livestock products and processing products, such as those used to make cheese and wine.

In recent years, there have been a lot of new innovations with anaerobic digestate. This liquid and solid waste comes from anaerobic digesters, such as those that generate power from dairy manure, said Kelsey McKee, OMRI's review program and quality director.

OMRI's role is to ensure the digestate byproduct doesn't contain substances that are prohibited in organic production, she said.

Input suppliers are also developing new products containing specific beneficial microbes and mycorrhizal fungi, McKee said.

These soil amendments go beyond general compost: Certain bacteria and fungi can reduce pressure from pathogens or maximize nutrient availability, she said.

OMRI determines whether these microorganisms are genetically engineered, which is excluded from organic farming, or are grown in synthetic media that aren't allowed.

"Different microbes can have different roles," McKee said. "We are looking at where are they getting it, how are they growing it."

Growing workload

Before OMRI was founded two decades ago, organic certifiers such as Oregon Tilth and California Certified Organic Farmers would review branded products for compliance with organic standards.

As the work became increasingly time-consuming, these and other organic groups chipped in financially to launch OMRI, which would be

dedicated to this function.

With the climbing number of products proposed for listing, the institute has been swamped with work.

When Miars was hired seven years ago, the organization received about 40 applications a month. It's now up to 130.

Since the organization wasn't willing to compromise on thoroughness, the backlog has lengthened OMRI's review periods, Miars said. "We had a reputation for being really slow."

A hiring spree that increased OMRI's staff by 50 percent over the past two years has reduced the wait time. In late 2016, the median review process took seven months, but it's now down to two months.

OMRI is also automating its application process to require less data-entry from employees, which the institute hopes will further improve efficiency.

"We are relying more and more on technology," Miars said.

Cutting down on mind-numbing tasks serves another worthwhile function: making jobs at OMRI more rewarding.

Recruiting and training educated workers costs money, so the nonprofit must focus on retaining them, she said. "It's



Western Innovator

Organic Materials Review Institute

Executive director: Peggy Miars

Founded: 1997

Headquarters: Eugene, Ore.

Employees: 56

Function: Reviewing branded products for compliance with organic standards.

Listed products: More than 6,000

Product categories: More than 86 percent are crop-related, 7 percent are processing-related and nearly 7 percent are livestock-related.

Product origins: 70 percent are from the U.S., 13 percent are from Mexico, 7 percent are from Canada, and 10 percent are from 36 other countries.

good to see people want to stay with OMRI and grow with us."

To that end, the institute encourages its employees to give presentations and write articles about obscure materials-related dilemmas.

For example, can paper bags with colored ink be used in organic compost? The answer is yes — the ink is considered an unavoidable environmental contaminant.

The institute has also set its sights beyond the U.S.

In 2012, OMRI started a program to review materials that are compliant with Canada's organic standards, and it's looking to replicate the effort in Mexico.

Currently, organic materials review in Mexico is conducted by organic certifiers, Miars said. "There are certifiers and growers in Mexico who would love it if we could launch that program tomorrow."



From left, Clancey Krahn, Jim Krahn, Allan Hanselman, ODFFA board vice president, and Gracie Krahn at ODFFA's annual convention.



ODFA Photos
Tom Thomson and Bruce Wilson are honored at ODFFA's annual convention.



From left, Oregon State University Agriculture Dean Dan Arp; Todd Leuthold, ODFFA board member; and Chad Allen, ODFFA board president.



From left, Allan Hanselman and Pete DeHaan share a moment ODFFA's annual convention.

Oregon Dairy Farmers honor five for lifelong contributions

Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — The Oregon Dairy Farmers Association acknowledged five individuals' contributions to the state's dairy industry during the organization's annual convention.

During the awards luncheon, ODFFA recognized Pete DeHaan for his years of service on the ODFFA Board. DeHaan served as the producer representative for the Western States organization, participating in conference calls, and traveling to meetings throughout the West and in Washington, D.C., last spring as part of the Oregon delegation that met with elected officials and others. He also represented ODFFA at sev-

eral National Milk conferences.

ODFA and the Oregon Dairy and Nutrition Council jointly recognized Oregon State University's College of Agriculture Dean Dan Arp. He has been a friend of the dairy industry for many years and will retire this summer.

Additionally, ODFFA presented awards to acknowledge three recipients for their lifelong contributions to the industry. Bruce Wilson and Tom Thomson received the Distinguished Service Award and Jim Krahn received the Community Service Award.

Wilson and Thomson were honored for their work to develop and enhance the Online Decision-making and Record-Keeping system, known by the ac-

ronym ODARK. They wrote grants and raised \$115,000 from multiple sources to develop ODARK as an online record-keeping tool for manure management. More recently they have raised an additional \$55,000 to convert ODARK to a planning tool.

Throughout their careers, both men have focused on helping producers understand and conquer engineering and agronomic challenges, ODFFA said in a press release. Together, Wilson and Thomson have written the majority of the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan and Confined Animal Feeding Operation plans in Oregon.

Krahn served as executive director of ODFFA for 23 years. During his tenure,

he and Oregon producers worked on a variety of issues. Highlights include being involved in the organization of the Western States Dairy Producers Trade Association. He was involved with immigration and served on the Governor's Oregon Immigration Committee, a process that lasted two years. Krahn was actively engaged in recruitment of OSU students and restarted the OSU Dairy Judging Team. Through the years, the teams won 10 contests.

He was also influential in developing the Oregon CAFO program by bringing producers, regulators and environmental groups together. He was also involved in the 2008 Air Emission Legislative Report.

Calendar

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301 or emailed to newsroom@capitalpress.com. Write "Calendar" in the subject line.

Saturday, April 14

Small Acreage Expo. 8:30 a.m.-3:45 p.m. Heritage Farm, 1919 N.E. 78th St., Vancouver, Wash. A full day of workshops will be offered, and representatives from a variety of agricultural organizations and agencies will be on hand. Cost: \$15 in advance, \$25 at the expo. Website: expo2018.brownpaperickets.com

Understanding and Maintaining Farm Equipment. 1-5 p.m. Dunbar Farms, Medford, Ore. This class of-

fers an introduction to farm equipment maintenance and repair including: how small gas engines and larger gas and diesel engines run, basic maintenance and tuning; trouble-shooting problems and how to tell whether you can fix a problem. Register online at <http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarms> or send an email to paula.burkhalter@oregonstate.edu or call 541-776-7371. Cost: \$20 each person. Website: <http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarms>

Oregon Hemp Convention. 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Portland Expo Center, 2060 N Marine Drive, Portland, Ore. Cannabis industry leaders, entrepreneurs, networkers and newcomers will gather to learn best business practices for maintaining a successful cannabis business. Website: <http://oregonhempconvention.com/>

Thursday, April 19

In the Field: Salem Agriculture

Seminar. 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Willamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE, Salem, Ore. A no-cost seminar for a discussion specifically designed to provide agribusiness owners and their managers with the tools they need to get organized. Topics include the new tax cuts, finances and financial statements, regulatory updates on water and wetlands, organizing an agri-business and estate planning for farms and ranches. Sponsored by Schwabe, Williamson and Wyatt. RSVP at <http://bit.ly/2FwaRPV>. Cost: Free

Shepherds' Extravaganza. 2-10 p.m. Washington State Fair, 110 Ninth Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. Sheep and Fleece Show, vendors of supplies, used fiber-related equipment, demonstrations, workshops. Cost: No cost after admission to the Spring Fair. Website: www.shepherds-extravaganza.com

aganza.com

Thursday-Sunday April 19-22

Puyallup Spring Fair. Washington State Fairgrounds, 110 Ninth Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. Website: <http://www.thefair.com/spring-fair>

Friday, April 20

Changing Hands: A Workshop on Farm Succession Planning and Access to Land. 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Harmony West Campus, Clackamas Community College, 7726 SE Harmony Road, Milwaukie, Ore. Rogue Farm Corps' workshop will bring together aspiring and retiring farmers for a full day of training on land access and succession planning. Cost: \$20 Website: www.roguefarm-corp.org/planning

Saturday, April 21

Oregon Women for Ag Auction and Dinner. 5:30 p.m. Linn County Fair and Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road, Albany, Ore. This exciting event is a fundraiser for Oregon Women for Agriculture, which advocates for all things involving agriculture in the state. Web: owaonline.org

Tree School East. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Baker High School, 2500 E St., Baker City, Ore. This year the school will offer 29 classes on everything from multi-aged forest management to geology. Sponsored by OSU Extension, the Oregon Forest Resources Institute and the Oregon Small Woodlands Association. Cost: \$50, \$20 for 18 and younger with an adult family member. Website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/baker/>

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