

ORGANIC, from page 4

adhering to them, van Saun said, there are a handful of “bad actors” producing organic eggs with industrial-model infrastructures that don’t want to change.

“It’s a small number of producers,” she said, “but because they are massive, they do produce a fair amount of eggs that are labeled organic.”

The USDA considers less than 1 percent of producers to be “large,” but they are responsible for 25 percent of all organic egg production.

A Cornucopia Institute investigation found that Cal-Maine and Herbruck’s Poultry were among the largest egg producers to oppose the new rules requiring outdoor access and limits on population density in organic eggs and poultry.

Both of these companies sell eggs under several brands, including Eggland’s Best. They also sell eggs to store-brand organic

labels such as Safeway (O Organics), Kroger (Fred Meyer’s Simple Truth Organic) and Trader Joe’s.

“When people think organic, they don’t think of three birds crowded into one square foot of space or no outdoor access for chickens and poultry,” van Saun said.

She said that while the rules are now slated to go into effect in November, she

isn’t sure if it will happen without more pushing from the public or additional litigation.

Connie Karr, the certification director at Oregon Tilth, is strongly supportive of the new animal welfare standards and that most operations in Oregon are already following the new guidelines. She said the delay is unfortunate. “It’s a real bureaucratic mess right now,” she said.

Oregon Tilth is the third-largest organic certifier in the U.S., and it certifies organic growers across the nation and advocates on their behalf. Karr said that in Oregon, while there are some mid-sized to large producers, the majority are “the smaller, family-sized farms.”

While the new rules will make conditions for birds better than the status quo, there are additional issues around poultry the Center for Food Safety would like to see addressed.

For example, there are no organic hatcheries where producers can get non-commercial chicks. This means that the same breed of bird that’s been bred to grow fast in confinement with enlarged breasts – a breed that doesn’t do well outdoors – is the same breed organic farmers often purchase.

Additionally, hatcheries typically trim chicks’ beaks and inject them with vaccines and other drugs. The organic label provides for this “first day of life” exemption from organic rules, but advocates say organic hatcheries are needed for organic poultry and egg producers.

Pigs, however, are not included in any past

or present proposed organic rules for animal welfare. Pigs are one of the most intelligent animals in the world, ranking somewhere between the fourth and 10th smartest, depending on the source.

“I think what people would want is for pigs to be able to engage in their natural behaviors,” van Saun said. “If sows are in gestation crates where they can’t move around much to keep them from biting each other or attacking or hurting each other because they are so overcrowded, that is a pretty terrible practice that a lot of people are rightfully upset about.”

However, a side effect of not being able to use antibiotics and hormones makes keeping overcrowded pigs in confinement more difficult.

“They rely on those drugs to be able to keep the animals from dying,” van Saun said. But her firm would like to see rules requiring access to outdoors and ample space to move around, like the poultry rules would require.

“Pigs are the last frontier,” she said.

There are animal welfare labels, such as Animal Welfare Approved and Certified Humane, that consumers can look to when seeking humanely raised food. However, because they are private labels, the inspection and certification process isn’t as transparent and reliable as the USDA Organic label.

But, van Saun said, she would choose a product with one of those labels over one without, and consumers can visit each label’s website to find out what producers have to do to earn their certification, including space required per animal, access to outdoors, and animal health and well-being.

What’s in the compost?

For five years starting in 2011, unbeknownst to consumers, pesticide-contaminated compost was allowed in organic farming.

An engineer and concerned citizen living in Banks, Ore., at the time, Rich Wallick, uncovered this quiet change in federal policy when he made a series of records requests.

Wallick had read about how some large organic food growers were using synthetic nitrogen fertilizers.

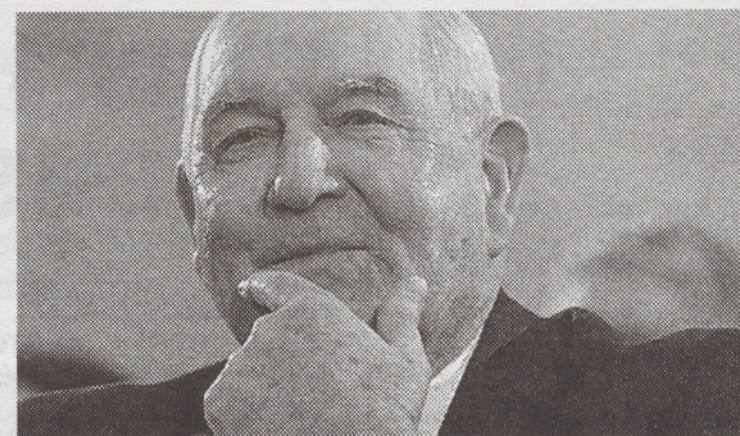
“It piqued my curiosity,” he said. It prompted him to seek documentation from various government agencies through the Freedom of Information Act to find out why this was happening.

In response, he was sent a document dump – more than 10,000 pages of mostly irrelevant information. But he found something else among the many pages, he said. It had to do with compost, which is crucial to organic farming.

In the earlier years of organic, most producers made their own compost. The idea of a sustainable, closed-looped system is one of the key principles behind organic production.

But as food-industry giants began to establish their own organic labels, they needed a compost source. That’s when yard waste compost largely entered the organic market. The only problem is that urban yard waste contains all sorts of synthetic chemicals that people apply to their lawns, trees and gardens.

In 2009, the California Department of Food and Agriculture discovered three compost products used to grow organic wheatgrass were contaminated with bifenthrin, a common household insecticide.



Sonny Perdue

BEYOND CONSUMING

Tell Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue how you feel about the poultry and egg rule delay and what you want the USDA Organic label to reflect.

Call: 202-720-7100

Fax: 202-720-2166

Write:

Office of the Executive Secretariat
United States Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Building, Room 116A
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Call the National Organic Program:
202-720-3252

MORE ONLINE

For email alerts letting you know when new proposed rules threaten organic policy, you can sign up for no cost with Center for Food Safety at centerforfoodsafety.org.

Tell the National Organics Standards Board what you think before its fall meeting, where comments will be taken into consideration. You can submit comments to the board directly at www.regulations.gov/document?D=AMS_FRDOC_0001-1600 before Oct. 11, 2017.

Visit cornucopia.org to see action alerts and how different organic egg, dairy, cereal, soy and pet food brands stack up.

The Organic Food Production Act of 1990 specifically prohibits the use of: “Any fertilizer or composted plant and animal material that contains a synthetic substance not included on the National List of synthetic substances allowed for use in organic crop production.”

As a result, California banned those compost products for use in organic farming. The USDA initially agreed. But according to attorneys at the Center for Food Safety, that’s when some of the larger organic companies that were relying on yard waste compost interjected, arguing they needed this large-scale source of compost to operate.

Rather than conducting a formal rule change to allow for contaminated compost, which would have required public notice and an open public comment period, the USDA’s National Organic Program issued a guidance document that changed the definition of the word “contains” as it refers to synthetics.

This opened the door for use of contaminated fertilizers and compost in organic agriculture without notifying the public.

Through emails obtained in his records

See ORGANIC, page 7

**HOW DOES YOUR EGG BRAND STACK UP?**

See the Organic Egg Scorecard to get an up-to-date ranking of eggs brands: cornucopia.org/organic-egg-scorecard