Livestock Recommendations -- 1998-99

NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARDS BOARD
LIVESTOCK COMMITTEE
PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS ON WILD ANIMALS

October 27, 1998

Recommendation

The NOP should not develop organic certification standards for wild animals including fish harvested in the wild.

Determination of whether an animal or fish is wild should be based on the extent to which its life is spent outside captivity and under living conditions which cannot be adequately controlled and monitored in accordance with an organic plan. The inability to ensure compliance with an organic plan concerning feed, medical treatment, living conditions and certifier inspection should preclude the certification of animals, including fish, which spend significant portions of their life beyond the producer's control.

Background

Statutory Authority

The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) provides an opportunity, but not a mandate, to create standards for the certification of animals caught in the wild. Under Section 6502(11) the term "livestock" is defined as: any cattle, sheep, goats, swine, poultry, equine animals used for food or in the production of food, ***fish used for food***, ***wild*** or domesticated game, or other non-plant life. However, OFPA provides no specific guidance for setting standards for wild animals. Rather, four principle areas are to be considered for all certified organic livestock, wild or domesticated: parentage, feed source, health care including medication, and identification / record keeping.

In contrast, OFPA does stipulate distinct criteria for the certification of wild harvested crops. In Section 6513(f)(1)-(4), which describes the organic plan, OFPA specifies four requirements for wild crops: producers must designate a harvest area, submit a three year management plan, make provisions to protect the viability of the target species (including habitat), and demonstrate that no prohibited substances have or will be used.

Wild Crops versus Wild Animals

Fundamental differences in behavior preclude extending the criteria developed for wild crops to animals caught in the wild. Animals enjoy greater mobility animals which presents challenges to certifying conditions across an undocumented and unpredictable home range. The placement of the criteria for certifying wild crops within the provisions for developing an organic plan reflects the importance which the OFPA attaches to verification and accountability. A separate analysis is necessary to determine how, if at all, animals, including fish, which are born wild and enjoy freedom of mobility throughout their existence are eligible for organic certification. This analysis requires consideration of how animals in the wild differ from those in captivity as well as how conditions in the wild differ for animals compared to plants.

Likelihood of Failure to Meet Organic Certification Criteria

Traditionally, certified organic means produced through a holistic management system in which inputs and yields are managed sustainably with regard to all components of the environment. The harvesting of wild animals and fish is not automatically inconsistent with this understanding but the inherent constraints it imposes on human oversight make certification problematic. While wild animals certainly exist within a system, it is not one which any human producer can supervise adequately to insure compliance with all the requirements of organic certification.

The issue of access to the outdoors has become important in the standard setting process but is not relevant to wild animals. In general, wild animals would not appear to violate the statutory requirements pertinent to parentage, health care and identification. Wild animals are virtually never the offspring of conventionally raised parents, do not receive non-approved medications and should not be harder to segregate from non-organic stock than their domesticated counterparts. The inability to track and document a wild animal's feeding behavior, however, creates a potential obstacle to organic certification. Both intentional and accidental sources of contamination exist which could prevent a wild animal's feed supply from meeting organic criteria. For example, wild deer and turkeys could derive a substantial portion of their diet from crops treated with prohibited substances or grown with genetically engineered seed. Conversely, wild animals cannot be protected from unintentional sources of contamination (such as mercury or dioxin bioaccumulation) as domesticated animals can. Without the benefit of supervision and appropriate medical care, wild animals can harbor diseases and pathogens, such as parasites, and introduce them into the food supply. When a confined, organically raised animal is exposed to a prohibited substance or receives essential, non-certified treatment for an illness, it can de diverted to the conventional market. No such safeguards exist for wild individuals and populations which spend their lives beyond oversight.

While adequate for wild plant populations, these criteria are not suitable for certifying wild animals. Essentially, the wild crop criteria require a producer to designate, monitor and protect a parcel of land in accordance with prescribed certification standards. Certifying a harvest area works for stationary species such as maple trees but is not applicable to mobile populations such as deer, fish and game birds. No producer can assure compliance with the conditions contained in an organic plan without being able to restrict an animal's mobility to a specific area.

In addition to the specific inconsistencies cited, other provisions of the statute conflict with the inability to regulate or even document the full life cycle of wild animals. Under Section 6505(5), certified farms and handling operations must allow for annual on-site inspection by the certifying agent. The absence of recognizable boundaries for a harvest site make the required inspection impossible. Section 6505(7) requires certified operations to provide for appropriate and adequate enforcement procedures which, short of cradle to grave oversight, are impossible for wild animal populations.

Special Case of Honey

The certification of products derived from beekeeping reflects the challenge of drafting standards which account for environmental conditions beyond the producer's control. Bees exhibit a blend of domesticated and wild animal characteristics. They are subject to human management during their time in the hive but their ability to forage for miles can lead to exposure to prohibited substances. Traces of prohibited substances can be transferred to bee products such as honey. Certification organizations including Oregon Tilth, the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association and the Organic Growers and Buyers Association utilize two types of standards for bees: *prescriptive standards* for production aspects over which the producer has direct control and *descriptive standards* for the foraging range. When feeding bees, maintaining hives and processing honey, producers must comply with detailed standards involving approved, restricted and prohibited practices and materials. To meet the descriptive foraging requirements, producers

must identify the general area where their bees are expected to range and establish that it provides adequate nectar and contains minimal sources of contamination. Certifiers typically require that the principle source of nectar be known to be contaminant free such as organic crop land or untreated forest. Using this approach, certifiers enforce organic requirements during the captive phase of production and anticipate that careful forethought can minimize the potential for contamination during the wild phase. Additionally, some certifiers require residue testing of honey before allowing it to be sold as organic. Though the difficulty of compliance has kept the number of certified honey operations to a minimum, the standards are effective because the critical management functions (health care, supplemental feeding, product harvest) occur under human oversight and their foraging area, while variable, can be approximated and monitored. The NOP should implement certification standards for honey and other products derived from bees which incorporate prescriptive provisions for hive management and health care and descriptive provisions for foraging area. Such an approach has the most potential for preserving the integrity of certified product while enabling dedicated producers to achieve compliance.

Status of Wild Animal Standards

A review of existing certification standards, while not exhaustive, did not uncover any guidelines written specifically for wild animals or fish. The ability to isolate and manage an animal's environment is often the key criteria for certifying animals which are produced outside traditional confinement operations. For example, certification standards exist for aquaculture operations even for pens in open sea waters if sufficient site selection and contaminant monitoring conditions are met. Similar provisions could be effective for either naturally occurring or human introduced shellfish populations such as mussels which remain at a fixed location. Some certifiers have standards for seaweed which are consistent with wild crop management and harvest guidelines for terrestrial populations. No standards for wild caught fish or game were found.

Maintaining Ecolabeling Options

To help consumers better understand food production systems, the NOSB should vigorously support ecolabeling options as well as the organic label. The terms organic and organically grown are appropriate for well defined, closely regulated production systems such as field crops, domesticated livestock and certain wild harvested plants. For systems which cannot ensure a sufficient level of compliance to qualify as organic, alternative ecolabel claims can provide valuable information on how the products were harvested and handled. Production claims already in the marketplace such as dolphin safe tuna and turtle safe shrimp provide consumers with important environmental criteria to consider in their purchasing decisions. Additional ecolabeling options may emerge to educate consumers about the environmental impacts of production. A product need not have an organic seal for consumers to decide that purchasing it makes good environmental sense. By drawing reasonable boundaries on the concept of organic and supporting additional, third party verified ecolabeling claims, the NOSB will fulfill its statutory authority and foster better informed consumers.