



National Organic Coalition

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NOC MEMBERS

Beyond Pesticides

Center for Food Safety

Equal Exchange

Food & Water Watch

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association

Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services

National Cooperative Grocers Association

Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance

Northeast Organic Farming Association - Interstate Council

Organic Seed Alliance

Organically Grown Company

Rural Advancement Foundation International -USA

Union of Concerned Scientists

24 August 2012

AC 21 Committee
United States Department of Agriculture

Via Email: russell.redding@delval.edu
ac21@ars.usda.gov

Dear Members of the AC21 Committee:

I am writing you this letter on behalf of the National Organic Coalition (NOC) – a national alliance of organizations representing farmers, environmentalists, consumers and other organic industry members concerned about the integrity of the national organic standards. The goal of our coalition is to assure that organic integrity is maintained, that consumers' confidence is preserved, and that policies that affect the wider organic community are fair, equitable and encourage diversity of participation.

NOC has been following the AC21 process since its inception and has read with interest its Final Draft Report. The recognition within this Final Draft, that farmers who choose not to use GE technology to grow their crops have the right to do so is an important point and we are gratified to see this statement.

However, we are extremely disappointed with the narrow scope of the recommendations and the Committee's failure to seriously address farmer and consumer concerns about the unwanted contamination of our food supply with genetically engineered organisms. The Report's foundational definition and presumption of "co-existence" falls short of addressing the heart of the concept – facilitating all forms of agriculture and not allowing the use of one technology to preclude the use of others in the field or marketplace.

As you must know, the use of GE technology is prohibited in organic production systems and the presence of GE contamination in crops, seed and/or processed organic food pose a real threat to the integrity of organic and consumer confidence in organic products. We believe that it is the responsibility of the USDA and this advisory group to ensure fair farming for all. Yet, the failure of this Committee to address the prevention of GE contamination issue head-on by addressing the problematic nature of this technology and to suggest, instead, that some type of after-the-fact compensation mechanism will be sufficient to address contamination falls short of dealing with the reality of the issue.

A lot is at stake when organic farms are GE contaminated. Not only do farmers risk market losses, but they also risk losses of livelihood, reputation, standing in their community, partnerships, consumer trust and so much more; all of which they built around their desire to grow the most ecologically and healthy food possible. This is compromised when they are GE contaminated, due to no fault of their own.

Can you imagine what it would be like for an organic farmer who has no desire whatsoever to farm using GE technology to be asked to buy insurance to cover the cost of contamination from which they derive absolutely no benefit, and only costs? Yet this is the compensation mechanism that “brings the greatest support from AC21 members.” Clearly, there is something wrong with this picture and proposal to blame and penalize the non-users of GE technology to pay for their own compensation. While we support farmers being compensated when their crops are contaminated by GE organisms, we believe that compensation in the absence of GE contamination prevention measures put in place by the patent holders of this technology merely perpetuates this contamination suffered by organic and non-GE conventional farmers. This ill-conceived idea of penalizing the victim is unjust and fails to address the root cause of the problem: GE contamination itself.

The draft Final Report’s suggestion that cultivating neighbor-to-neighbor relations is the best strategy for minimizing GE contamination provides little comfort to organic growers. The problem of unwanted contamination is not just between farming neighbors since pollen may travel much further than adjoining fields and does not address other mechanisms of unwanted GE contamination such as seed or post harvest handling. While good relations between neighbors is a start, they provide no legal, binding or reliable assurances that concrete contamination prevention measures will be taken by GE technology users, particularly when disagreements arise. By claiming that farmers prefer and respond better to “voluntary innovation and incentives,” the AC21 committee sidesteps the real need to directly protect organic farmers through the institution of USDA-mandated contamination prevention practices and regulations. The USDA has a key role to play in oversight and enforcement of stewardship practices that help mitigate and prevent problems, such as GE contamination.

The Report’s assertion that GE crops do not create risks novel to agriculture has been debunked time and time again. With the discovery of “super weeds” and the outcrossing of GE crops with wild weedy relatives, as well as other agronomic, environmental, and socioeconomic challenges, these serious threats to farmer livelihoods require solutions that extend far beyond any temporary or minimal relief that compensation can provide. Moreover, consumer preferences cannot be ignored. In many domestic and international marketplaces, consumers reject products that contain novel, GE traits. This continues to pose new economic risks for farmers and it would continue to do so even if they were insured.

In conclusion, organic can no longer be considered a marginal sector of the US economy. It is a 31 billion dollar industry and it is the fastest growing sector of agriculture. The organic sector is also a major contributor to job growth. In fact, the Organic Trade

Association estimates that 527,000 jobs were created by the organic foods industry in 2010 and its contribution to increasing jobs across the nation has grown at a 21 % higher rate than that of the conventional foods industry. In these difficult economic times, few industries can boast of such a high contribution to job growth or the economy. Organic and Identity Preserved producers already invest in measures to protect the integrity of their products exported to sensitive markets. Such practices are specifically required in accordance with the organic rules. It is time for USDA to demonstrate that GE contamination prevention is possible by mandating that measures are taken to uphold the goal of prevention and facilitating fair farming for all.

We urge participants on this Committee to *not* join in consensus with the text of the AC21 Draft Final Report. The work of the AC21 Committee should include a more thoughtful and detailed description of USDA mandated measures needed to prevent GE contamination. The recommendation that GE contaminated farmers buy insurance to pay for unwanted contamination should not be part of the committee's recommendation to the Secretary. Moreover, AC-21 should urge USDA to reinvigorate classical breeding for public cultivar development to ensure improved elite breeding lines and varieties are available to all farmers and breeders. This will facilitate greater choice and options in the marketplace.

Thank you for your consideration of our remarks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Liana Hoodes".

Liana Hoodes
Executive Director