

ORGANIC FOODS - CONSUMER CONCERNS

(by Consumer Panel members May Kidd and Eva Lewis)

Introduction

This paper consists of two papers each provided independently by Panel members May Kidd and Eva Lewis. Following a request from Panel members, an Information Paper (CP(INF)99/9) was provided in October 1999 about imports of organic produce. The Consumer Panel has continued to be concerned that consumers should be well served by suppliers and producers in the light of the growing popularity of organic foods.

May Kidd

Concerns about food quality and safety, including pesticide residues and disease problems associated with food continue to grow. The public are looking for food which is of good nutritional quality and safe to eat. Against that background the principles of organic farming are sensible and appealing.

According to the Soil Association "The main components of an organic farming system are the avoidance of artificial fertilisers and pesticides, the use of crop rotations, and other forms of husbandry to maintain fertility and control weeds, pests and diseases." The aim is to work with natural processes rather than seek to dominate them, and to be self-sustaining.

Recently I attended an organic food conference organised by the Institute of Grocery Distribution. The first session looked at strategies for developing the organic food market. The second session considered how best to market organic food, while the final session learned from the experience of those who already successfully produce organic food in the UK and in Austria. Issues which arose and remarks made during the conference left me with some unanswered questions and concerns about the organic food in our shops.

Imported Organic Foods - Up To UK Standards?

Elliot Morley MP, Parliamentary Secretary at MAFF, outlined the Government's role. He said the consumption of organic food is growing 40% per annum. The amount of land in organic production has increased by 400% and there is a huge increase in applications from farmers to go organic. But at present 70% of the organic food sold in the UK is imported.

The Minister was asked what is MAFF's role in regulating the quality of imports. He replied that it is very difficult to monitor imports. Politically one cannot send representatives into another country to check it out. We have to work on trust. We have to have quality standards and independent checks. Imports from other EU countries are not Soil Association Accredited. There are slight variations. Standards need as far as possible to be harmonised.

I understand that in the UK any farmer wishing to produce food for sale as organic must comply with EU Regulation 2092/91, which became operational in January 1993. This defines organic farming, sets out minimum standards of production and stipulates that organic farmers must be registered with a certification scheme which itself must be approved by the national certifying authority. In the UK this authority is the UK Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS). Inspection and certification are carried out by five approved organisations of which the Soil Association is by far the largest.

Since as much as 70% of our organic food is produced outside the UK we need to be sure that standards in other countries are, at least, in line with ours. Can the consumer really feel confident about the safety of imported organic food if we only work on trust? We must have confidence in the supervisory system.

Is Organic Food Healthier?

Patrick Holden, Director of the Soil Association, quoted the results of a MORI survey (June 1999) which showed that one third of the public buy organic food, and as many as 83% of the public support the principle of Government grant schemes for organic farmers.

Why do people buy organic food?

-it is healthy
-no chemicals
-tastes better
-GM free
-better for environment
-better for animal welfare

The consumer assumes organic food is not only healthy but *healthier*. But it was admitted at the conference that no one can claim organic food is healthier. Such a claim is not allowed.

During the conference it was said that over 30 additives are allowed in organic production, that washing in sodium hypochlorite is permitted, that EU regulations permit GM products, that highly toxic pesticides are permitted, that the use of copper sulphate can be a danger. Time did not allow further clarification of the above statements, some of which seemed to conflict with what had been said earlier. As a result I find myself confused about the rules that govern the growing of organic produce.

The Supermarkets - Are They Cashing In?

Supermarkets have two-thirds of the organic market and are the fastest growing sector. All supermarkets now give organics a high profile in-store.

One of the supermarket representatives made a statement which concerned me: "Organic" is a brand - the strongest brand name ever invented." He appeared to view the description 'organic' as simply a highly effective marketing tool.

Even allowing for the fact that he was speaking to an audience consisting mainly of wholesale and retail food companies, this did lead me to reflect: - Is the consumer being 'conned'?

Better for the Environment?

It is difficult to measure the environmental effects of organic farming. CWS Farms Group has been experimenting with organic farming since 1989, with much success. However, their Project manager made the point:

"The perception that organic farming is *per se* better for the environment because it relies on natural processes does not always hold true. Natural processes are variable and outside the growers control. This can cause problems. The natural breakdown of mineral nitrogen, for example, can occur at the wrong time for the plants, increasing the chances of nitrate leaching."

"Wildlife likes the 'unkempt' bits and organic farms are not necessarily likely to have more untidy areas than conventional farms."

Conclusion

It seems there is a gap between the consumer's perception of 'organic' foods, and the reality of the situation.

Eva Lewis

There seem to be a lot of concerns over organic produce. I have talked to lots of people and they are concerned about the claims that organically farmed food is better and safer than that grown under modern agricultural techniques.

I read in one newspaper that Professor Tony Trewevas of Edinburgh University's Department of Cell and Molecular Biology told a seminar at the Roslin Institute: "Organic food is considerably less safe than we are led to believe because it depends on animal waste for its production which means a higher risk of infection of organisms such as E-coli 0157." He said that fresh lettuce, cabbage and parsley from 'organic' sources posed a potentially serious public health risk and went on to say: "It is just a matter of time before we see the appearance of mycotoxins in our food chain from so-called organic farming."

He also said that microbiological spoilage of organic food was a recognised problem and that there were no current plans to monitor the long-term effects of present day organic food. (The Herald, 8 September 1999)

In the Sunday Times (5 September 1999) it was written that Professor Alan Gray, Acting Chairman of ACRE (Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment) said, "It was a myth that organic food was safer. You are 30 times more likely to poison yourself with organic produce because it allows Bt (the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*) to spread directly. When ingested the bacterium produces endotoxins which attack the walls of insects' guts. In mammals they can cause death from toxic shock." The article goes on to say that the Bt toxin is one of the key features of many GM crops. Because it is derived from the soil it is deemed to be natural and organic farmers are allowed to spray it. It also affects the health of the people who work with it.

Farmyard manure

It has been said that farmyard manure is used as a fertiliser in organic farming and that there are concerns about possible contamination of the produce with pathogens like E.coli and the possible contamination of ground and surface water. Also there could be a risk to human and animal health from pathogens in animal wastes.

I then read that the use of farmyard manure as a fertiliser whether in organic or non-organic farming gives rise to concerns about the possible contamination of agricultural produce with pathogens (especially E.coli 0157) and the possible contamination of ground and surface water. The UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in its 19th report on the Sustainable Use of Soil (1996) reviewed the use of organic materials in agriculture, including their safety. It concluded that there is a potential risk to human and animal health from pathogens in animal wastes.

Lots of people that I have talked to, have expressed a concern for the retail side of organic food.

How do we the shopper know that the food is really organic? Lots of people that I have talked to express a concern for proof of organic produce. It seems as if anyone can sell organic food, i.e. school fairs, car boot sales, markets, without any proof that it is organic.

I have been told that there is a stamp or a sign relating to organic foods but I don't know about it.

Supermarkets

Organic foods are now being promoted quite strongly in our supermarkets these days. They are much more expensive, on average 40% more than non-organic foods according to a recent survey by Which? Magazine (Financial Times 16 January 1999).

In April 1997 a survey by Health Which? showed that more than 80% of those buying organic food did so to avoid pesticide residues.

Concerns

Non-organic farming uses artificial fertilisers as well as farmyard manure: how does that affect the produce against the fact that organic farming only uses farmyard manure?

Could farmyard manure be dangerous to the consumer?

Do we know exactly what the animals are fed on?

Farmyard manure - is it getting into ground and surface water?

Imports of organic produce - what is the situation here and how would it affect the imports of organic produce?

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