

This free monthly newsletter is provided by the FQH association to keep researchers, the industry and other interested parties abreast of the latest news in organic food quality, research, health, diet and other relevant issues. Comments and contributions are welcome, or if you find an item of news that you think should be included, please email news@organicfqhresearch.org

Quote of the month:

"If you analyse the motives for buying organic food, it correlates to the amount of information a consumer has had. The challenge we have is to create more informed consumers."

Patrick Holden, Director of the Soil Association UK

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PESTICIDES

Canada: Cancer expert urges gardeners to abandon pesticides

A Canadian cancer specialist urged gardeners gathered from across Ontario to take an organic approach to their lawns and gardens and maintain them without chemicals. Homeowners spread 100 times more chemicals such as pesticides than farmers and the impact is harming human health as well as the environment, Dr. Dolores Sicheri told a workshop of delegates attending the Ontario Horticultural Association's convention in Windsor. Sicheri, a medical oncologist with the Windsor Regional Cancer Centre, pointed to the substantial increase in childhood cancer rates in recent years, which she believes is linked to environmental pollution, including pesticides.

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ANTIBIOTICS

UK: Antibiotic resistance not stopped by ban on growth promoters alone

The EU's ban of antibiotic growth promoters, introduced to protect human health, has had little benefit according to a study in the Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy. University of London researchers report that the ban of growth promoters has resulted in a deterioration in animal health, including increased diarrhoea, weight loss and mortality due to various infections. A directly attributable effect of these infections is the increase in usage of *therapeutic* antibiotics in food animals, many of which are of direct importance in human medicine. The authors conclude that "The theoretical and political benefit of the widespread ban of growth promoters needs to be more carefully weighed against the increasingly apparent adverse consequences." Clearly, without any change in on-farm practices, these animals are highly susceptible to disease and the medical value of antibiotics continues to be squandered for the sake of cheap meat and short-term profits. An abstract of the article can be found by visiting: <http://jac.oupjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/52/2/159>

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UK: "Tonnes" of antibiotics still used by pig farmers

The use of antibiotics in intensive pig farming has been highlighted by the Soil Association. Although an EU ban prevents some antibiotics from being used as growth promoters, tonnes of drugs are being prescribed by vets. There is evidence that antibiotics used in pig feed can make it more difficult to treat the hospital superbug VRE. A Government committee has also warned that the effectiveness of a drug used to treat food poisoning in children could also be affected and The World Health Organisation has recently called on all countries to ban the use of antibiotics for growth promotion to protect public health. One problem drug is Tylosin, a member of a group of antibiotics called macrolides. Government figures show that the amount of macrolides prescribed by vets increased from 23 tonnes

in 1998 to 55 tonnes in 2002. [full press release is available from www.soilassociation.org]

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ADDITIVES

GMOs

UK: Carlo Leifert explains why he resigned from the GM Science Review Panel

“When I joined the GM science review panel, I thought that we would be doing a detailed risk assessment. We would work out where there might be problems with GM, what the nature of the problems might be and what research had to be done to prove whether or not they were significant. From the very start, we should have looked at whether something could go wrong with the technology itself. If you add an alien gene to a plant, how do you know what side effects you will get? We know that if we add genes to bacteria, it can change things unintentionally, and studies show this can happen in plants as well. How good are our methods to detect these unintentional changes?”

But it soon became clear we wouldn't be doing a detailed risk assessment. Part of the problem came down to how scientific results are reported. If anyone had found that the GM process caused unwanted side effects in plants, it probably wouldn't make it into the scientific journals. Side effects would be viewed as negative results and scientists tend not to publish those. They often only get mentioned in PhD theses and reports to sponsors, because in those you have to explain why you've taken so long to do something. I made the point that to do a proper risk assessment, we needed to try and obtain that original data to get an idea of how often such side effects happen. This request was ignored. The panel felt we should focus mainly on peer-reviewed work and that going into that much detail would take too long. I completely disagreed with this approach. It quickly became apparent that the panel wasn't balanced enough to produce an objective report. Most of the biologists who really understood the technical details of some of the arguments were strongly pro-GM. I felt that there should have been more specialists on board who weren't so indiscriminantly positive about the technology. There should have been more of an attempt to recruit scientists with good molecular biology knowledge and a more critical approach to the technology.

For me, the last straw came when someone from the biotech industry was asked to write the chapter on food safety. It seemed incredibly naive to me to have someone whose interest is in selling GM to do the risk assessment chapter. They were already convinced of its safety. I tried to resign quietly, because I was warned that it was not a good idea criticising your peers on scientific panels. But once everyone knew I had resigned and I was asked about my reasons, I felt that I had to explain why. Especially because what we have now from the panel is a

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report that is essentially pro-GM. It means the government decision makers may have to react to this scientific advice by allowing imports of GM crops and the growing of GM crops in the UK. In my opinion, this report is not carefully enough researched to give the green light to GM and doesn't identify the uncertainties well enough." (Guardian newspaper, UK 24/7)

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Australia: First tests show industry struggling to avoid GE contamination

The Australian government's first survey of genetically engineered (GE) foods on supermarket shelves shows that larger manufacturers overwhelmingly reject the use of GE materials in their products. However, many companies are finding that contamination is difficult to keep out. Results released at the weekend by the regulator, Food Standards Australian New Zealand (FSANZ), found that of the 51 common products surveyed -including soymilk, cornchips, cornflakes and bread - 20% tested positive for low levels of GE despite efforts to exclude the unwanted contamination.

"The study shows that food companies are listening to their customers and are trying to do the right thing by trying to keep GE out of their food chain," said John Hepburn, GE campaigner for Greenpeace. Despite this, companies are finding it difficult and are having put in place expensive systems to test for it. "Companies are having a hard enough time keeping imported GE corn and soy out of their products. If GE canola is introduced in Australia, as is the federal government's wish, the problem is only going to get worse - particularly for small businesses that don't have the resources to implement expensive quality assurance systems."

"These results send a clear message to the Federal Agriculture Minister, Warren Truss, and the agricultural industry that Australian food companies are rejecting GE and introducing GE canola will make GE contamination more difficult to manage. It will impose additional cost on the majority of Australian food producers - particularly small businesses - that are listening to their customers and are wanting to produce GE free food," Mr Hepburn said. "Mr Truss is negligent to back the commercial release of GE canola when it presents such a negative impact on the food industry, potential export markets, farmers, and the majority of the Australian public who refuse to buy GE foods."

The FSANZ tests follow recent reports by the Western and South Australian governments, and the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE), that have highlighted the market risks, as well as the inevitability of contamination, if GE canola is introduced. The FSANZ study concurs with Greenpeace's own research of over 900 common food brands that shows that most companies are rejecting GE. The full results will be launched in the second edition of Greenpeace's True Food Guide in September. John Hepburn, Genetic Engineering Campaigner, Greenpeace Australia Pacific, Ph (02) 9263 0302, Fax (02) 9261 4588 Email: john.hepburn@au.greenpeace.org Web: <http://www.greenpeace.org.au>

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UK: Monitoring the health effects of GM foods on the population

Thousands of families could be asked by the government to allow access to their health records in an attempt to discover whether GM foods are safe. The feasibility of linking consumption data to health outcomes came to light this week following investigations into the buying and eating of novel foods, including genetically modified foods. In May 1999, a report from the UK's Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor was published reviewing the health implications of genetically modified foods (Donaldson and May, 1999). It made a number of recommendations, including *"instituting population health surveillance...to monitor population health aspects of genetically modified and other types of novel foods"*.

As a result, the UK food safety body – the Food Standards Agency (FSA) - linked up with a range of stakeholders, including the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP), to explore two commercially available databases and their potential for long-term monitoring of foods and food ingredients. Essentially, the study – undertaken by Imperial College - analysed data on general food consumption and food purchasing patterns, as well as monitoring the buying and eating of a number of specific marker products. The proposals will fuel suspicions that British families are to be 'guinea pigs' in a vast GM experiment. Eating habits would be compared against GP's records, hospital admissions and data held on a large number of illnesses, ranging from allergies to birth defects and cancers.

Difficulties arose when monitoring individual ingredients that are incorporated into a wide variety of foods, such as soya flour. In addition, Imperial College was unable to assess individual consumption of foods because available purchase and sales data is based on a sample of households or generated at supermarket level (and then further aggregated for confidentiality). As a result, the rather disappointing outcome from the feasibility study means that it only examined food product data, and not health data. Stakeholders will go back to the drawing board and are due to meet to discuss the outcome of the project and its recommendations on 30 September. (Food Navigator 30/7)

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BSE

NUTRIENT CONTENT

EU: Polyphenols may diminish intestinal cancer risk

Increasing intake of polyphenols, by eating more fruits and vegetables such as apricots or onions, or taking supplements, may help to prevent intestinal cancer, reports a European research group. The team found that a complex wine polyphenol mixture could prevent the development of intestinal tumours. The tests
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are part of the ongoing Polybind project, designed to improve understanding of the uptake and metabolism of polyphenols, such as quercetin found in onions, and catechins, found in cherries, tea and apricots. Colon cancer is a major cause of premature death in Europe, accounting for approximately 75000 deaths each year. Polyphenols have previously been shown to have anti-cancer properties.

The researchers assessed the effects of a complex wine polyphenol mixture on pre-cancerous lesions and tumours of the rat colon. They reported that the red wine polyphenols had a protective suppressing effect against colon carcinogenesis when the exposure to intestinal carcinogens induces a moderate response in terms of tumours developing. Such an effect was not seen when a large number of tumours were induced by chemicals. The trials are currently pending publication. For more information, contact project co-ordinator, Christine Hill., on christine.hill@bbsrc.ac.uk (FoodNavigator.com 11/8/2003)

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HEALTH & DIET

RESEARCH

US: Organic research acres growing

A new report by the Organic Farming Research Foundation says the total number of organic research acres in the U.S. land grant system has more than doubled between 2001 and 2003. Farmers in 36 states can benefit from organic research plots at their land grant university, 14 more than in 2001. "Fourteen states that had no organic research acres in 2001 now do," commented Jane Sooby, OFRF's Technical Program Coordinator and author of the study. "Now, farmers in 36 states can benefit from organic research plots at their land grant university. We'd like farmers in all states to be able to do that."

The OFRF study found that, overall, organic research occupies only 1,160 acres (0.13 percent) of the 885,862 available research acres in the land grant system. A recent USDA report documents that overall, 0.3 percent of all U.S. farmland is certified organic. In high-value crops such as vegetables, a full 2 percent of U.S. acreage is certified organic. OFRF found that certified organic research acreage is only 496 acres (0.06 percent) of the total available research acreage. This represents a trebling of the 154 certified organic research acres that OFRF reported in 2001, a growth trend that OFRF expects will continue. The OFRF Board has set a goal that 10 percent of federal agricultural research funds be directed to organic research by 2006. The five states having the strongest organic research programs in 2001 - Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota, North Carolina, and West Virginia - are joined by new programs in Washington and New York. South Carolina, Maryland, Florida, and New Hampshire have emerging organic research programs and are

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bringing research land through the transition to certified status. Michigan and California both have relatively high numbers of organic research projects being conducted, but lack a centrally coordinated organic research program. Land grants in Wisconsin, Oregon, and Pennsylvania have notably few resources for the large numbers of organic farmers in these states.

OFRF considers the effort made to certify research areas as organic to be an indicator of a land grant institution's level of commitment to organic research. "If they have certified organic research acres, they are much more likely to provide accurate information to local organic growers," said Bob Scowcroft, OFRF Executive Director. "They have made a long-term commitment to organic, and are held to the same standards that the farmers are." Federal organic standards require that farms be certified organic if the farm products are to be marketed as organic.

The land grant system consists of 68 land grant universities, a national network of agricultural research stations, and Cooperative Extension personnel in every U.S. county. Because the land grant system is funded with federal tax dollars, OFRF expects it to respond to the needs of all its constituents, including the growing number of organic farmers. The Organic Farming Research Foundation's purpose is to foster the improvement and widespread adoption of organic farming practices. To that end, our mission is to sponsor research related to organic farming; to disseminate research results to organic farmers and to growers interested in adopting organic production systems; and to educate the public and decision makers about organic farming issues. Further information on organic research being conducted in your state is accessible by downloading the full report posted on the OFRF website
<http://www.ofrf.org/publications/SoS/SoS2.overview.page.html>

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US: OFRF changes grant deadline

The Organic Farming Research Foundation, which has disbursed nearly \$1.2 million in organic research grants since 1990, will be accepting grant applications on July 15 and Dec. 15 of each year. This is a change from previous years, when Jan. 15 was the deadline for spring grant applications

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US: Priorities for organic livestock research sought

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) is carrying out an online survey to identify priorities for organic livestock research. Go to <http://www.misa.umn.edu> to contribute. (Organic-research.com 1/8/03)

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EU: 24 new food quality and safety projects announced

24 food quality and safety research projects and 12 support actions have been awarded an initial EU contribution of €1 66 million in the first year of the EU 6th Research Framework Programme (FP6). They are the first projects of this kind to receive FP6 funding, totalling close to €20 billion over 4 years (2003-2006). The projects and networks, some of which will receive up to €17 million each, will tackle consumer-oriented issues such as food-related diseases and allergies, the impact of food on health, environmentally-friendly production methods, and environmental health risks, making extensive use of the new approaches offered by FP6. Most of these major new research initiatives will contribute to the implementation of relevant EU policies with sound scientific data and recommendations. Organic research projects are included in the program, such as:

Food from low input and organic production systems: Ensuring the safety and improving quality along the whole chain

This integrated project (33 participants) aims to lead to new technologies and systems for organic and low input production systems. One of its major strengths is a matrix structure whereby the research will consider the whole food chain from fork to farm for a number of sectors including protected crops (tomato), field vegetables (lettuce), fruit (apple), cereal (wheat), pork, dairy and poultry. It addresses consumer attitudes and expectations, impact of organic foods on nutritional, sensory, microbiological and toxicological quality/safety of foods, development of new technologies and identification of socio-economic, environmental and sustainability impacts of innovations. This project has the scientific rigour to provide the meaningful information that is lacking on the extent to which differences in production systems affect nutritional value, taste and safety of food. It is expected to make a significant impact on increasing the competitiveness of the organic industry in a number of sectors to the benefit of the European consumers.

For more information on all the projects funded see

http://europa.eu.int/rapid/start/cgi/guesten.ksh?p_action=gettxt=gt&doc=IP/03/1120%7C0%7CRAPID&lg=EN;

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PROMOTION

US: Consumer motivations to purchase organic food explored

The Hartman Group, a Washington state-based consumer market research and consulting firm that serves natural products and health and wellness industries, has researched consumers of organic products since 1989. Michelle Barry, vice president of qualitative research for the firm, said its most recent research has found that income and education levels have much less to do with consumer interest in organic products than first suspected.

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"People tend to think that educated environmentalists are the only one's buying these products," Barry said. "We have found that it's much more about food philosophy and lifestyle." Barry said that most organic product consumers are purchasing organic products for pragmatic health reasons and not because of environmental concerns. So, a mix of what Barry called "starving students" and "80-year-olds" are trying organic foods and products.

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EU: Moves to better control health claims on food products

This month there were visible signs that Europe is trying to get to grips with what critics may call the 'grey area' of labelling of health-related products with the Commission tabling tough rules on health claims. The European Commission has proposed new measures that would establish a clampdown on the health claims made about food products. The European body wants all claims about the benefits of food to be backed up by solid science. As the trend towards health-boosting foods continues on its upward curve, and after years of lobbying for much-needed pan-European health claims, the proposals have not been warmly received by the food industry.

Europe's food industry trade body, the Confederation of EU Food & Drink Industry (CIAA), was quick to criticise the regulation, warning that restrictions could hamper trade and 'the food and drink manufacturers' ability to communicate health benefits to consumers'. The body encouraged EU legislators to pursue their "*goal of stimulating innovation in the food sector*". Essentially, everything that is not expressly authorised by the regulation will be banned. This reverses the current position where everything that is not expressly prohibited is permitted with the proviso that the consumer is not misled.

Under the proposed rules, 'vague and meaningless' claims will be banned as well as potentially misleading terms such as "90 per cent fat free" and "reduces your calorific intake". Strict rules would also be in force for the use of terms such as "fat free", "no added sugar" and "high fibre". Defending the proposals earlier this month, EU Health and Consumer Affairs Commissioner David Byrne said: "*Any information about foods and their nutritional value used in labelling, marketing and advertising which is not clear, accurate and meaningful and cannot be substantiated will not be permitted.*" Present day European rules demand that food manufacturers have to reveal the full ingredients to consumers on labels but laws regulating the use of claims – such as "low fat" or "high fibre" – are less than clear.

But not all were disheartened by the proposals. Jim Murray, director of the European Consumers' Organisation (BEUC) called the draft a 'very good proposal' adding that that it should help 'to ensure that consumers will have better and clearer information about the food they eat including, we hope, products that are eaten mainly by children.' In the UK, Sue Davies, of the Consumers' Association, said: "*These proposals will tackle this confusion once and for all so that consumers*

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will no longer be handing over money for products without the guarantee that they will deliver the health benefits they promise."

By providing the consumer with more information, the proposed changes to labelling would certainly alter consumers' perceptions of the health benefits of their favourite foods. But for the food industry, if the new rules are passed, even the brands of some of Europe's biggest food companies could be affected. The new legislative draft will be forwarded to the European Parliament and the Council, with a view to entering into force by 2005. (FoodNavigator.com 30/7)

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Germany: Nationwide organic information campaign launched

A second nationwide campaign has been launched in Germany to educate consumers about the benefits of buying organic. The campaign is mainly intended to approach women between 35 and 50 (consumer decision-makers), young families, young people and 'casual buyers' of organic products. Image building and conveying values (modern, innovative, valuable products, enjoyment) are as much part of the communication goals as recognition of the added personal and social benefits associated with the purchase of organic products (enjoyment, nature, ethics, environment). There are advertisements in popular magazines and a booklet "What you should know": facts on organic farming (16 pages, circulation 10.5 million) in women's and other magazines. Also planned are posters in selected shops, posters in shopping trolleys and advertising on the Internet.

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POLITICS

USA: Consumer group calls for experts on diet committee to be replaced

A US consumer group has called on the Bush administration to remove seven of the 13 experts named to revise America's Dietary Guidelines because of their links with the food industry. The guidelines, which are published every five years, provide a summary of the scientific consensus on what constitutes a healthy diet. The current version advises people to be physically active, to eat a variety of grain, fruit and vegetables and to limit intake of fat, sugar and salt, reported Reuters.

The Bush administration last week appointed members to its Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee in order to start work on the next version, due in 2005. The Center for Science in the Public Interest expressed its concerns about seven members of the committee who have received research and consulting money from the food and drug industries. "At a time of great concern over obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases, the extent of those biases should have disqualified them from membership on such an important committee," Michael Jacobson, executive director of the consumer group, was quoted by Reuters as

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saying. The US Department of Agriculture said the members were all respected experts in their fields and would not be replaced. (20/8 just-food.com)

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