

# The Augusta Chronicle

## Bad-faith organics: Former USDA inspector now embraces GMOs

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Guest Columnist

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There was a time when the American organic movement actually stood for something.

I grew up on an organic grain farm and worked from 1998 to 2003 as a U.S. Department of Agriculture-contracted organic inspector. Organic farmers still were in control back then, and were looking for no-till (or minimum-till) methods that don't rely on synthetic herbicides, which are banned in organic production.

Sadly, the effort failed, thanks entirely to the rise of a new, rabidly urban organic leadership that is against genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

**NATURAL SUBSTANCES** were experimented with to replace Monsanto's herbicide Roundup, but all proved ineffective, leaving the roots of weeds to regenerate; or proving more toxic than Roundup, turning an organic field into a moonscape devoid of beneficial insects and microorganisms.

Not a single peer-reviewed article was written admitting to the failure, and organic farmers are forced to this day to till their land as their grandparents did to kill weeds, a practice that requires 10 times more fossil fuel per acre than spraying. And this created market pressure for retailers to shift to dubious, imported certified-organic food as fewer American farmers could justify the astronomical fuel cost of converting to organic.

Rather than listen to the concerns of domestic farmers, urban activists who had never worked a day on a farm simply redoubled their attack against the single most-promising innovation in farming since the discovery of the ammonia-synthesis process in 1917 – genetically-modified organisms. GMOs facilitate no-till farming and have allowed nine-tenths of American crop farmers to quit pulverizing their soil.

But the activists didn't care. They began abusing the tax code and scared people into believing there are too many unknowns when it comes to growing and consuming GMO crops, never providing any evidence. And they never have answered for the fact that most non-GMO, government-approved certified-organic food doesn't even come from America fields.

So that's when I left the organic movement. By 2003, just one year after President Bush signed President Clinton's National Organic Program (NOP) into law, the organic movement no longer bore any resemblance to what it had once stood for so proudly. Nutrition and purity were sacrificed and replaced with an irrational, religious opposition to GMOs, even though GMO crops offer precisely what the organic movement once claimed to provide.

It was bad enough when Washington, D.C., gave anti-GMO activists lax standards for their fledgling "organic" industry. By downplaying field testing during the Clinton administration, activists literally could make whatever outlandish marketing claims they wanted against GMOs. And a billion-dollar anti-science industry was launched.

**BUT THINGS THEN** went from bad to worse during the Bush years when enforcement of the watered-down field-testing clause of the USDA NOP was finally ignored altogether – not by Bush as activists claim, but by the organic industry itself. That guaranteed a complete lack of oversight of America's organic industry by federal regulators. The USDA NOP henceforth became the *sine qua non* of the anti-GMO movement.

The organic industry is now bigger than Major League Baseball, based on cheap imports from countries such as China, and sheer, tax-subsidized paranoia. Everything is negotiable in Washington, even the most basic principles of science. And the NOP now is an entirely negative force being used to bludgeon innovation.

Yet, American farm and commodity groups, alongside most GMO corporations, actually support the organic movement, pretending it's just fine to deride genetically engineered crops even though they cut down dramatically on fuel and pesticide usage while preserving our precious topsoil.

Meanwhile, since organic crops are not tested under the Clinton-Bush USDA NOP, a whopping 43 percent of certified-organic food contains synthetic pesticide residue. Why pay homage to that? Are the leaders of science-based farming in America really so desperate to be part of the "in" crowd?

Finally, the *coup de grâce* for GMO farming in America: Republican Rep. Mike Pompeo's GMO labelling bill (House Resolution 1599).

With bipartisan support, this law will allow the secretary of agriculture – a political appointee – to use his discretion to establish a threshold limit of just 0.9 percent for GMOs in organic food, a completely arbitrary number arrived at through negotiations with our European trading partners, not through science.

Never mind that GMOs never have caused a single illness anywhere – even in Europe, where millions of tons of American GMO feed are imported every year. Pompeo's bill will make it possible for organic activists to sue GMO farmers directly if any GMO pollen drifts over a fence line.

**PRESIDENT CLINTON** tried to get organic stakeholders to accept GMO crops on a case-by-case basis. This would have provided the solution to organic no-till farming. Thousands of honest, hard-working American organic farmers remain open to the idea of growing GMO crops, appreciating that the first successful GMO crop – papaya – requires no pesticides, and could, like the majority of GMO crops on the drawing board, be grown under organic management.

But, alas, urban organic activists have turned the American organic movement into an anti-GMO movement, whether farmers like it or not, all based on politics and the failure to develop a viable organic version of no-till farming.

Oh well – if you can't join 'em, beat 'em I guess.

**(The writer is a former USDA-contract organic inspector and an author.)**