

USDA Rep: Organic Rules To Be Practical

(Continued from Page A1)

really lose the forest with too much fixation on the leaves."

Keating, an ag marketing specialist with the NOP, said that zero tolerance of synthetic materials and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is not the main thing consumers look for in their food sources. They are more interested in wholistic production practices such as crop rotation, pasturing, and overall animal welfare, he said.

Although the organic movement originally gained impetus out of a concern for residual pesticides on food, that focus has broadened into a much wider concern for sustainable ag practices, with the nation's lawmakers increasingly joining that movement, he said.

The role that consumers play in organic policy should be a balanced one, according to Keating.

"It's important to respond to consumer demand, but we don't want a standard written by consumers," he said.

A finalized version of the NOP's organic rule will be released in the spring.

Reporting on an October meeting of the NOSB, Keating noted the board's recommendation to require that cattle and other ruminants have access to pasture in order to be certified organic, and the requirement that poultry have access to the outdoors be made more clear in the final rule.

The NOSB is also moving toward stricter standards for compost production, Keating said, with the final recommendations from a compost task force expected in early spring.

With organic farming now becoming subject to federal regulations, Leslie Zuck, executive director of PCO and organic farmer from Spring Mills, said that the nonprofit certifying agency is taking up the responsibility to insure that Pennsylvania producers have the information and training they need to continue operating under the USDA's national organic program.

"We're here to help you know what works and what doesn't work," she said.

PCO President Mike Brownback pointed out vast changes in the perceptions and practices of organic agriculture since his first attempts as an organic producer in 1982.

At that time, Brownback had decided that "America wasn't ready for organic produce," he said, and switched back to a conventional farrowing-to-finish hog operation. He continued to question the system he was using, however, and returned to organic vegetable production in 1991.

"I want to produce something my customers want," Brownback said of his decision to remain in organic agriculture. "I want to feel good about what I do, and I want to be rewarded at the marketplace."

"(Farming organically) has to be more than a mental decision. It has to be a philosophical decision," he said.

Brownback and his wife Terra operate a 188-acre organic vegetable, hay, and grain farm near Loysville, serving more than 200 community supported agriculture (CSA) customers as well as supplying various wholesalers in the area.

Other PCO representatives and farm inspectors spoke to the group on specific issues related to making the transition to organic farming and maintaining certification.

One of the topics that raised questions from the audience was the definition of buffer zones required to protect organically certified fields from chemical and pollen drift from neighboring fields and lawns.

Several producers pointed out instances in which the buffer zones required by organic regulations were inadequate against the drift of unwanted materials.

PCO farm inspector Al Johnson emphasized the site-specific nature of the rules, which take into account a variety of factors including lay of the land, width of buffer zones, and the type of vegetation in buffer zones.

"Every situation is different,"

Johnson said, with decisions being made on a "case-by-case basis."

Johnson said he conducts thorough farm inspections, which include looking at the practices used on neighboring farms and yards. Ultimately, organic producers "are under the responsibility to minimize the impact of the outside environment."

In some cases, that could mean planting a thick stand of fast-growing trees and/or widening the buffer zones on field borders, he said.

Johnson stressed the importance of recordkeeping in acquiring and maintaining organic certification as written proof of the materials applied to fields.

"Recordkeeping makes the difference between an organic farmer and a certified organic farmer," he said.

Other speakers included Alfred Walker, chairman of the PCO materials board.

Walker, a working chemist, focused on the formidable task of interpreting federal lists of accepted and prohibited materials, including that compiled by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI).

Walker said his job is to help people understand the pitfalls involved in material selection and urged producers to be inquisitive.

"Many people don't think they should ask questions when they should," he said.

Established in 1997, PCO educates and certifies organic farmers within Pennsylvania, with the goal of assuring the integrity of organic products grown and processed in the state.

According to Zuck, PCO has certified about 250 farms to

Hospital Exchange

(continued from Page A1)

ing to Rogers.

This year's sign-up list has her expecting more than 10,000 cookies for the exchange, scheduled Dec. 6-7 from 8 a.m.-8 p.m. daily in the hospital lobby.

The cookie exchange works like this: First, contributors bring six dozen cookies. They select 2½ dozen of their choice to take home with them. Another 2½ dozen are sold to raise funds for the hospital, and the additional dozen will be distributed to the firefighters and rescue workers at New York's Ground Zero.

"It's a way almost everyone can participate," Rogers said of helping the hospital and the rescue workers — with the added bonus of attaining unique varieties of cookies.

As founder and chairperson of the annual cookie exchange, Rogers constantly convinces friends, neighbors, and family to help with the event. This Thanksgiving, she told 25 dinner guests that they must each bring a batch of cookie dough.

After the Thanksgiving feast, the guests baked cookies in Rogers' kitchen — until the oven door fell off. Opening and

date, including about 75 dairies and a variety of vegetable, fruit, and livestock operations.

Producers must show proof of organic practices for three years prior to becoming eligible for certification. PCO also lists "transitional" farms in their directory.

For more information about PCO and organic certification, call (814) 364-1344 or e-mail PaOrganic@aol.com.

closing the oven door must have worn it out.

"After that, we had to take the door off and put on manually whenever we removed cookie sheets — if that wasn't a job," Rogers said.

Auxiliary member Phyllis Wolf, Akron, is another staunch cookie lover. For breakfast, she has dunked a cookie in her coffee every morning for the past 47 years.

In addition to making cookies for the hospital, Wolf also spreads holiday joy by giving cookies to residents in a local nursing home.

For the past two years, the cookie exchange has provided \$1,100 annually for the hospital.

"We are fortunate to have a hospital of this caliber in the community. I get a thrill out of making money for the hospital," Rogers said.

"You don't need to sign up ahead of time — just show up in the hospital lobby the morning of the exchange. Please bring your recipe to share."

The dozen of cookies to be sent to Ground Zero should be packaged separately and clearly marked.

Both Rogers and Wolf make at least seven different varieties for Christmas holidays.

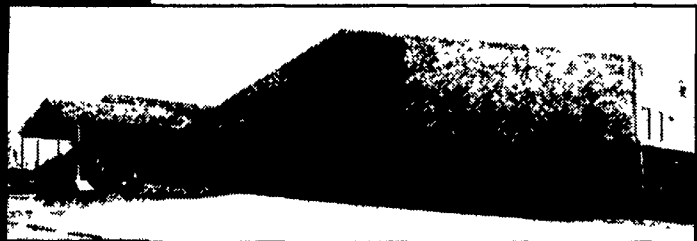
Rogers also loves new recipes. Every year she makes at least one new variety in addition to traditional ones.

"Some years are winners, and some are not," Rogers said of experimenting with unknown recipes. This year she made two new varieties that she considers winners.

Check next week's cookie feature in *Lancaster Farming* for her winning cookie recipes, plus many more favorites from our readers.

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