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Tyler Morning Telegraph

Editorial: Government shouldn't police meaningless term 'organic'

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Are you willing to pay more for “organic” food? More importantly, are you willing to pay more for food, in order to fund the policing of that term by the feds?

The term “organic” automatically raises the profile and price of an item, and although it implies healthier, sustainably grown meat and produce, it means practically nothing.

The government needs to get out of the business of deciding what’s organic and what isn’t, even as the USDA is considering stronger enforcement measures.

“Why are consumers willing to pay almost double for food labeled organic?” asks the Cato Institute. “The average consumer probably believes that the ‘USDA Organic’ label issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture implies the food comes from small local farms that use production techniques that are environmentally friendly and result in food that is better for human health.”

But that’s not the case - at least, not always. The Washington Post recently looked at one organic dairy.

“The High Plains dairy complex reflects the new scale of the U.S. organic industry: It is big,” the Post reported. “Stretching across miles of pastures and feedlots north of Greeley, Colo., the complex is home to more than 15,000 cows, making it more than 100 times the size of a typical organic herd. It is the main facility of Aurora Organic Dairy, a company that produces enough milk to supply the house brands of Walmart, Costco and other major retailers.”

The dairy is very proud of its organic label.

“But a closer look at Aurora and other large operations highlights critical weaknesses in the unorthodox inspection system that the Agriculture Department uses to ensure that ‘organic’ food is really organic,” the Post explains. “The U.S. organic market now counts more than \$40 billion in annual sales and includes products imported from about 100 countries. To enforce the organic rules across this vast industry, the USDA allows farmers to hire and pay their own inspectors to certify them as ‘USDA Organic.’ Industry defenders say enforcement is robust. But the problems at an entity such as Aurora suggest that even large, prominent players can fall short of standards without detection.”

The issue isn’t Aurora. The issue is the government’s involvement in deciding what’s organic and what isn’t.

The feds simply shouldn’t be involved. That’s essentially what then-Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said in 2002, when the USDA rules were finalized.

“Let me be clear about one thing: the organic label is a marketing tool. It is not a statement about food safety,” he said then. “Nor is ‘organic’ a value judgment about nutrition or quality.”

So why is the government even involved? A better alternative would be a private sector, industry-policed regime - the way kosher foods are certified.

Again, it’s not a matter of organic meaning healthier; there’s little evidence organic foods are better, and in fact are worse for the environment because they require more land and water.

Yet consumers are free to buy what they please. But as Cato asks, “should government aid producers at the expense of consumers and taxpayers?”