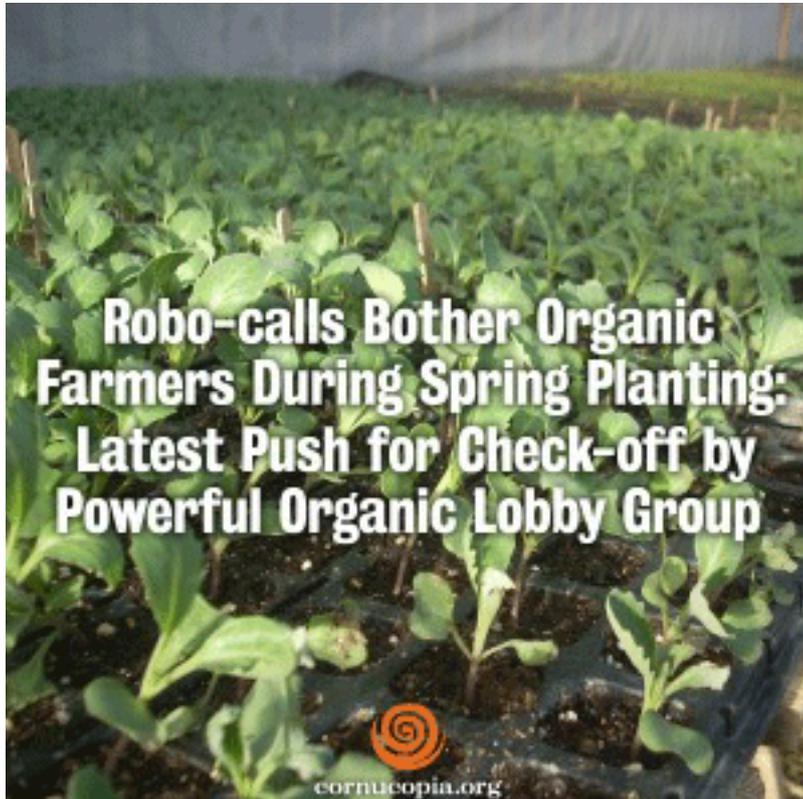


Organic Trade Group Robo-Calls for Check-Off Program

The Cornucopia Institute



CORNUCOPIA, WI — The Organic Trade Association (OTA) has launched the next phase of its push for an organic check-off program. The industry lobby group, funded by the likes of General Mills, WhiteWave, Organic Valley and Smucker's, has been working the phone lines, robo-calling thousands of organic farmers across the country and urging them to watch their mail for informational materials detailing the purported benefits of the check-off and why the program's assessment would be in the farmer's interest.

"What many industry observers found objectionable and disingenuous in the OTA's lobby effort on Capitol Hill was the fact that, after holding 'Townhall' listening sessions around the country, and receiving virtually no support from farmers attending, they reported to congressional staffers that there was unanimity of support in the organic community for their scheme," said Mark A. Kastel, senior farm policy analyst at [The Cornucopia Institute](#) [1], a Wisconsin-based farm policy research group. [The OTA](#) [2], with hired help from a well-connected Washington lobbying and public relations firm, the Podesta Group, was able to insert a provision in the Farm Bill recently passed by Congress in February permitting creation of a USDA market order to assess participants in the organic industry for promotion/marketing campaigns and research projects. The OTA estimates that the proposal would raise \$40 million to fund such efforts. The creation of an organic check-off requires a vote by industry participants with a two-thirds majority

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necessary for consideration of the marketing order by the USDA.

Farmers and farmer organizations have indeed been skeptical, if not downright hostile, towards the OTA's check-off scheme, which has been one of OTA's top priorities for the past three years. Reactions from farmers to the robo-calls in May, on the email list-serve operated by the [Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance](#) [3] (NODPA), reflect those sentiments.

"This is nothing but a gigantic rip-off," said one farmer. Another farmer added: "I wish these guys would just go away and leave us alone. If any farmers really wanted this crap to happen it would have by now!!!!!" A third farmer observed that "dairy farmers are easy cash-cows for 2 simple reasons - they have high gross organic sales, and they sell primarily to a single buyer who can be required by law to collect/remit the money."

The colorful brochure mailed by OTA to all organic farmers in the U.S. boldly asserts that a check-off "will help secure our future." It lists various marketing and research plans that they suggest would benefit organic stakeholders, with a description of how the check-off would be implemented. The brochure also highlights several quotes of support - all coming from OTA members and insiders, although none are identified as such.

To build credibility for promotion and research check-off the OTA's brochure included the Got Milk? promotional campaign.

"I wish I was making this up," said Cornucopia's Kastel. "The brochure states that the campaign, in the early '90s, received a '91% awareness rating' and resulted in increased advertising expenditures of \$37.9 million, but they fail to mention the precipitous drop in fluid milk consumption in the U.S. subsequent to the launch of the campaign."

Ed Maltby, NODPA's executive director, calls OTA's outreach a "one sided propaganda campaign." He notes that it fails to ask "the basic question of whether we want or need a federal government program to promote the organic label and assist with funding of organic research." Maltby adds: "There are many half-truths and sound bites now being used by OTA to describe the benefits of a USDA Organic Check-off program that are misleading at best."

One of the potentially troublesome areas concerns organic food marketing and promotion. Other commodity campaigns, such as those employed for dairy, beef or pork, have used generic advertising as way to try and boost consumer consumption. However, crafting an organic-specific message could prove very difficult. The standard to which messaging is held to is: Would the Secretary of Agriculture say this? And in the eyes of the federal government, organic agriculture and food is a process claim - not a content, food safety or food quality claim.

"You can also be assured," explains Richard Matthews, "that the USDA will not allow any promotional or information program, project, or activity that can be viewed as disparaging to conventionally produced products So those who think they are

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going to be able to sing the praises of organic as compared to conventional had better begin rethinking their position." Matthews, now retired after a career at the USDA, spent more than eleven years providing oversight to similar check-off programs for other food commodities.

One unusual feature of OTA's proposal is the cross-commodity impact. All other check-off programs have been limited to a specific commodity (almonds, eggs, raisins, dairy, etc.). But this plan would cover everyone with an organic certificate. So vegetable growers and other farmers never covered by any check-off program could face an assessment based on their gross sales. Furthermore, processors, handlers and retailers could be taxed as well.

In what is being billed as a magnanimous gesture, part of the plan the OTA is floating would exempt the smallest certified organic farmers in the country. Some observers suggest that removing a large percentage of grassroots farmers out of the debate and voting process, shrinking the electorate, would make it more likely that a referendum could pass.

"The OTA's efforts for a mandatory organic research and promotion check-off are misguided," says Oren Holle, president of the organic farm commodity marketer OFARM and a diversified organic grain and livestock farmer in Kansas. Holle adds that existing check-off programs are "heavily weighted towards special interests and lack the opportunity for viable policy changing input from the producers that fund it."

OFARM (www.ofarm.coop [4]) and NODPA have previously coordinated a letter of opposition to the organic check-off that was sent to members of Congress. NODPA also continues to push an online petition at its website (www.NODPA.com [5]) opposing the proposal.

Perhaps to cover the criticism it has been taking from farmers over the check-off proposal, the OTA recently established its own Farmer Advisory Council. "This is just like corporations coming up with 'worker councils' as a way to fight workers having the right to form unions," further observes Kastel.

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A number of the council members are not bona fide farmers and many are employees or have financial relationships with the buyers of organic commodities.

"One of the 'farmers' the OTA has chosen to represent the voice of hard-working organic producers in the country is the CEO of a major egg processor, marketing organic and conventional eggs," Kastel added. "They don't produce any eggs themselves. Rather they contract with dozens of farmers across the country. It's the same production model that corporations like Tyson use. This is far from a legitimate body representing legitimate family farmers."

Although the battle lines seem to be firmly drawn the OTA is obviously trying to influence public opinion. In early June organic farmers reported a follow-up phone call asking if they had "received the brochure" and also surveying producers on whether they supported or opposed the check-off. And, more recently, the OTA has sent out an email soliciting responses to a web-poll. The outstanding question is, what will the OTA do with their newly developed pro and con database? This is the same kind of polling that happens during partisan political campaigns.

The OTA's campaign for the organic check-off could stretch over two years. "If the

organic food manufacturers and processors were to set something up that's

voluntary, some farmers may very well want to participate," says Kastel. "But that

is not what the OTA is pursuing with the use of strong-arm tactics and powerful

lobbyists, so farmers will need to stay vigilant. And when this comes to a vote,

farmers will be bombarded with happy talk and propaganda from the OTA and the

biggest corporate players in the organic industry. Farmers will need to stand up

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[3] http://cp.mcafee.com/d/2DRPoQrhoKODt4ttUTsSztBYQsIFLI8CQrILCzBBdZVYSztA sCYYqekNNJ6X8VZd6XVEVdAWDDBK9_2ByvM1mE6txfifG-xbundWwpS4Z8-HW4JVsS gRVdDmn-LOqarbObfnKnhd7b8XChNEVd7atSumKzp5dmXOfaxVZicHs3jq8USCMrLO

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