



National Organic Coalition

MEDIA RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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National Organic Coalition Disappointed Over USDA Decision to Move Forward with Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement ***Approach to Food Safety Concerns is Misguided***

April 26, 2011 – A marketplace agreement advanced by USDA would give false assurances to consumers about the safety of leafy greens vegetables, and create a bias toward chemical intensive, mono-cultural farming practices, to the detriment of organic farmers, consumers, and the environment.

Calling it the wrong approach to food safety concerns, the National Organic Coalition (NOC) today expressed deep disappointment over the decision by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to move forward with a proposed National Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (NLGMA).

"We agree with the need to address food safety issues, but attempting to address the issue through these means is taking the wrong avenue," said Steve Etko, Legislative Director of NOC. "We have seen proponents of this measure hold it up as a solution to food safety concerns. Yet, in states with agreements that served as the model for this proposal, farming practices have been imposed in the guise of food safety which have actually made matters worse."

The Agreement would establish a governance structure under which the largest leafy green produce handlers would hold the power to establish safety rules governing the growing and handling practices for leafy green vegetables. USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service would decide whether or not to approve the industry-written standards, after receiving public comment.

The focus of the Agreement is to address consumer confidence in the safety of leafy green vegetables, yet the Agriculture Marketing Service has no authority over produce food safety, and little expertise on the subject. This authority and expertise rests with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is currently in the process of writing produce food safety regulations as well.

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“It creates confusion in the marketplace and misleads consumers for USDA to be issuing food safety standards for leafy greens at the same time the FDA is issuing its own regulations,” said Etko. “If the USDA standards established by this proposed Agreement are in conflict with the FDA’s proposed standards, it creates confusion and uncertainty. If the USDA standards mirror the FDA standards, it’s duplicative and unnecessary. Why do this, unless the goal is to give the large, conventional handlers more control over the food safety standard writing process? That’s not in the best interests of consumers or farmers.”

The proposed Agreement is based on a proposal made by the nation’s largest produce marketers, and is mirrored on a similar agreement already in place in California. In its proposal, AMS modified the governance structure somewhat to address widespread concerns raised around the country by organic and small-scale farmers, consumers, food marketers, and environmentalists that the approach would lead to standards that are biased against organic and small-scale farmers and the environment.

“The Agreement puts the largest, conventional producer handlers in the driver’s seat for writing food safety standards, with the goal to establish those standards as the industry norm,” said Etko. “Yet we see many conventional farming and handling practices as part of the food safety problem, and have provided scientific research demonstrating how organic systems can be part of the solution. We are greatly concerned that those NLGMA standards will be biased against organic production systems, and will reinforce conventional, chemical-intensive practices in a misguided “solution” to food safety problems.

The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, after which the NLGMA is patterned, is biased against the use of non-synthetic, natural nutrient sources commonly used in organic production, in favor of chemical fertilizers. In addition, the California agreement has also provided strong incentive for farmers to remove wildlife habitat bordering growing areas, in stark contrast to federal organic standards, which require organic growers to provide for biodiversity on their farm. Organic farmers also rely on wildlife habitat to encourage the beneficial insects that are a common part of a typical organic farm’s non-chemical pest management strategy.

Proponents of the proposed NLGMA have stated that the agreement is voluntary, implying that organic growers may just “opt out” and avoid any negative impacts. But the Agreement is only voluntary to handlers, not to the growers that supply those handlers.

“From a practical sense, there is nothing at all voluntary about this Agreement for leafy greens growers. If their handler signs the Agreement, the grower has no market unless they follow whatever growing practices are dictated by the Agreement.”

“This move by USDA establishes governance and a scientific structure that assures a continuation of the large-scale, mono-cultural model of agriculture that we believe greatly contributes to the very food safety concerns it professes to address,” added Etko.

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The National Organic Coalition (NOC) is a national alliance of organizations working to provide a "Washington voice" for farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, consumers and progressive industry members involved in organic agriculture. NOC seeks to work cooperatively with, and add value to, existing organic and sustainable agriculture organizations, networks and coalitions to ensure a united voice for organic integrity.

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