

Los Angeles Times

Saturday, June 9, 2007

USDA May Relax Standards for Organic Foods

by Scott J. Wilson

With the “USDA organic” seal stamped on its label, Anheuser-Busch calls its Wild Hop Lager “the perfect organic experience.”

“In today’s world of artificial flavors, preservatives and factory farming, knowing what goes into what you eat and drink can just about drive you crazy,” the Wild Hop website says. “That’s why we have decided to go back to basics and do things the way they were meant to be ... naturally.”

But many beer drinkers may not know that Anheuser-Busch has the organic blessing from federal regulators even though Wild Hop Lager uses hops grown with chemical fertilizers and sprayed with pesticides.

A deadline of midnight Friday to come up with a new list of nonorganic ingredients allowed in USDA-certified organic products passed without action from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, leaving uncertain whether some foods currently labeled “USDA organic” would continue to be produced.

The agency is considering a list of 38 nonorganic ingredients that will be permitted in organic foods. Because of the broad uses of these ingredients - as colorings and flavorings, for example - almost any type of manufactured organic food could be affected, including cereal, sausage, bread and beer.

Organic food advocates have fought to block approval of some or all of the proposed ingredients, saying consumers would be misled.

“This proposal is blatant catering to powerful industry players who want the benefits of labeling their products ‘USDA organic’ without doing the work to source organic materials,” said Ronnie Cummins, executive director of the Organic Consumers Assn. of Finland, Minn., a nonprofit group that boasts 850,000 members.



CONFUSION IS NATURAL: Shawn Moebius loads beer bottles at Milwaukee's Lakefront Brewery, which has been making beer with 100% organic hops since 1996. By comparison, less than 10% of the hops in Anheuser-Busch's two new organic beers are actually organic. (Darren Hauck / For The Times)

USDA spokeswoman Joan Shaffer declined to comment on the plan.

Food manufacturers said this week that they were hoping the agency would approve the rules by Friday to continue labeling their products as organic.

A federal judge had given the USDA until midnight Friday to name the nonorganic ingredients it would allow in organic foods, but the agency did not release its final list by the end of the day.

“They probably don’t know what to do” Cummins said. “On the other hand, it’s hard to believe they’re going to make people change their labels, although that’s what they should do.”

Demand for organic food in the U.S. is booming as consumers seek products that are more healthful and friendlier to the environment. Sales have more than doubled in the last five years, reaching \$16.9 billion last year, according to the Organic Trade Assn. in Greenfield, Mass., which represents small and large food producers.

But with big companies entering what was formerly a mom-and-pop industry, new questions have arisen about what exactly goes into organic food. For food to be called organic, it must be grown without chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Animals must be raised without antibiotics and growth hormones and given some access to the outdoors.

Many nonorganic ingredients, including hops, are already being used in organic products, thanks to a USDA interpretation of the Organic Foods Protection Act of 1990. In 2005, a federal judge disagreed with how the USDA was applying the law and gave the agency two years to revise its rules.

Organic food supporters had hoped that the USDA would allow only a small number of substances, but were dismayed last month when the agency released the proposed list of 38 ingredients.

“Adding 38 new ingredients is not just a concession by the USDA, it is a major blow to the organic movement in the U.S. because it would erode consumer confidence in organic standards,” said Carl Chamberlain, a research assistant with the Pesticide Education Project in Raleigh, N.C.

In addition to hops, the list includes 19 food colorings, two starches, casings for sausages and hot dogs, fish oil, chipotle chili pepper, gelatin and a host of obscure ingredients (one, for instance, is a “bulking agent” and sweetener with the tongue-twisting name of fructooligosaccharides).

Under the agency’s proposal, as much as 5% of a food product could be made with these ingredients and still get the “USDA organic” seal. Hops, though a major component of beer’s flavor, are less than 5% of the final product because the beverage is mostly water.

Sales of organic beer, though still a small portion of total beer sales, have been growing even faster than overall organic food sales. They reached \$19 million in 2005, a 40% increase over the previous year (2006 figures are not yet available).

Trying to get a share of the market for green products, Anheuser-Busch introduced two organic beers in September, and soon pitched them in fliers to wholesalers.

“Environmentally conscious consumers are looking for certified organic products, including beer, the fastest-growing organic beverage,” the pitch said. “Capitalize on this growing market with Wild Hop Lager and Stone Mill Pale Ale.”

But while the two beers use 100% organic barley malt, less than 10% of the hops they use is organic. Hops are conelike flowers that grow on vines and impart a bitter taste on beer to offset the sweetness of malts.

Anheuser-Busch said it simply couldn't find enough organic hops.

“There currently is only a small supply of organically grown hops available for purchase by brewers, and we purchased all we could for brewing these beers,” said Doug Muhleman, vice president of brewing operations for Anheuser-Busch Inc.

But that argument doesn't wash with Russell Klisch, owner of Milwaukee's Lakefront Brewery, which has been producing beer with 100% organic hops since 1996.

“If we can do it, we think Anheuser-Busch, the world's largest beer producer with virtually unlimited resources, should be able to follow our example,” he said.

Klisch said there were enough organic hops to satisfy 90% of the current organic beer demand in the U.S., but some brewers were put off by their higher price.

There are no organic hops commercially grown in the U.S.; most come from New Zealand, Britain and Germany. But Klisch has recently contracted with two Wisconsin farmers to grow some on their land. He doesn't understand why large brewers can't do the same.

“You're telling me that Anheuser-Busch can't find a little plot of ground somewhere to grow organic hops?” he said.

In addition to hops, two other items on the USDA list have attracted particular attention: casings for sausages and hot dogs, and fish oil.

Casings are the intestines of cows, pigs or sheep, which have been used for centuries to wrap meat into sausages and frankfurters.

Although the casings are a tiny portion of the overall sausage, organic purists object to eating anything from animals that are raised on conventional farms, where livestock may

be housed in tight quarters and given antibiotics and growth hormones. Further, they note that the USDA's food safety division has identified cow intestines as a possible source of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease.

But the USDA has already banned part of the cow's small intestines for human consumption because of the risk of mad cow disease. Barbara Negrón, president of the North American Natural Casing Assn. in New York, said casings were safe to eat.

"It's a very safe, clean and natural product," she said. "It's not an organic product. It's a natural product."

It's very difficult to maintain pure organic eating habits, Negrón added, "unless you want to lock yourself up and only raise your own food."

Fish oil's presence on the USDA list has drawn objections because it could carry high levels of heavy metals and other contaminants, said Jim Riddle, a former member of the National Organic Standards Board. But fish oil producers said such contaminants could be screened out through proper processing.

The USDA rules come with what appears to be an important consumer protection: Manufacturers can use nonorganic ingredients only if organic versions are not "commercially available."

But food makers have found a way around this barrier, in part because the USDA doesn't enforce the rule directly. Instead, it depends on its certifying agents - 96 licensed organizations in the U.S. and overseas - to decide for themselves what it means for a product to be available in organic form.

Despite years of discussion, the USDA has yet to provide certifiers with standardized guidelines for enforcing this rule.

"There is no effective mechanism for identifying a lack of organic ingredients," complained executives of Pennsylvania Certified Organic, a nonprofit certifying agent, in a letter to the USDA. "It is a very challenging task to 'prove a negative' regarding the organic supply."

Large companies have a better chance of winning approval to use nonorganic ingredients because the amount they demand can exceed the small supply of organic equivalents, said Craig Minowa, environmental scientist for the Organic Consumers Assn.

scott.wilson@latimes.com