



Hearing Date for Lawsuit Contesting Organic Eligibility of Hydroponics and Aquaponics Set for June

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The fight to prevent aquaponics systems from being eligible for organic certification rages on, despite the 2018 vote by the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) to continue organic eligibility of aquaponic and hydroponic operations. On March 3, 2020 the Center for Food Safety (CFS) filed a new lawsuit demanding that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibit hydroponic operations from the Organic label. The CFS filing, which was endorsed by over a dozen organic farmer, retailer, consumer, and certifying organizations, argues that hydroponic production systems, which are also part of aquaponics operations, cannot comply with the organic soil standards because hydroponic crops do not use soil at all. The CFS contends that hydroponic food production methods violate organic law, which requires that organic farming include soil improvement and conservation of biodiversity. Because the lawsuit does not make a distinction between hydroponic and aquaponic operations, a decision against the USDA would likely have the same effect on aquaponics as on hydroponics and other controlled environment growers.

Aquaponic producers have long argued that the traditional views of organic production held by soil-based producers have not kept up with current science and innovations in agriculture, and have pointed to the lack of scientific evidence to support claims by soil organic producers that hydroponically produced vegetable are inferior both in quality and nutritional value, and that they should not qualify as organic. For those unfamiliar with aquaponics, it is a food production system that combines aquaculture, the production of fish and other aquatic species, with hydroponics, the growing of vegetables in a soilless medium, in a recirculating system. The benefits of aquaponics include significant water savings, fewer inputs, crops grown without pesticides, greater food safety with controlled- environment growing, greater production per area of land, and shorter supply chains. Aquaponics systems can be located in areas without access to fertile soils, such as urban areas,

providing consumers with greater access to fresh produce. The Aquaponics Association and its proponents argue that consumers do not choose organic produce because it is grown in soil but because it is pesticide-free, environmentally sustainable, and relies on natural ecosystems for plant growth. Aquaponic systems are produced without the use of pesticides, rely on a robust microflora in the rootzone composed of the same type of bacteria and fungi found in soil, and foster the cycling of resources. Aquaponics growers also ask why if they are using products labeled for organic production, should the resulting produce and plants not be considered organic.

There is no question that healthy soils play a vital role in global food security, and that worldwide soil degradation poses a severe risk to food production systems. Scientists agree that building soil health plays an important role in building climate resiliency. Healthy soils can sequester and store more atmospheric carbon, as well as retain more water, thereby reducing runoff and erosion. Researchers from our College of ACES have taken the lead in efforts to improve soil health by identifying a variety of management strategies that can be adopted (<https://newscenter.nmsu.edu/Articles/view/14264/research-to-improve-soil-health-takes-root-at-nmsu>). Organic growers named in the lawsuit insist that improving soil health and fertility are the bedrock of organic food production, and that allowing hydroponics to be certified as organic weakens the integrity of the Organic label. They further argue that hydroponic growers should not be allowed to “piggyback” on an Organic label that has taken more than 30 years to establish with consumers.

Regardless of which side of the organic debate you fall on, there is no question that food deserts, areas where people have limited access to affordable and good quality fresh foods, are a reality in many parts of the country, including parts of New Mexico. Arguments that organic produce should be more accessible and available to everyone, and that attempts to limit organic certification discriminates against growers in areas of the country without access to fertile soils or an abundance of water, are both compelling. In an era of climate change, depleting resources, such as available arable land and water, and rapid population growth, aquaponics and hydroponics provide innovative food production solutions to these issues. However, because of greater initial capital investments, financial considerations are important, and the organic price premium is a critical incentive to attract more aquaponic growers into the industry. If the lawsuit is successful in revoking the organic eligibility of aquaponics, supporters fear the industry will not grow as quickly, which will negatively impact the environment and economy. The court has set a hearing date for the lawsuit for June 11, 2020. More information about aquaponics and the lawsuit can be found by visiting the websites listed below.

References

<https://aquaponicsassociation.org/lawsuit-threatens-aquaponics-organic-eligibility/>

<https://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/press-releases/5941/farmers-and-nonprofits-sue-trumps-usda-over-organic-soil-less-loop-hole>

https://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/files/2020-03-02--ecf-01--plaintiffs-cfs-et-al-complaint_95614.pdf



Welcome Cecilia Marquez to the Extension Animal & Sciences Natural Resources Department. Cecilia is our new Fiscal Assistant, Sr. Her email address is cecmarqu@nmsu.edu, office phone number is (575)646-3325. Cecilia comes to us with lots of experience in bookkeeping and financial records. Stop by Knox 210 to introduce yourself to Cece.

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