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METRO ATLANTA / STATE NEWS 3:00 p.m. Saturday, July 25, 2009

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Do foods live up to the organic label?

By Craig Schneider
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

At the sunny Morningside Farmers Market in Atlanta, Sharon Barrington is checking out the organic arugula and chatting with the man who grew it.

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Jason Getz jgetz@ajc.com

Vinnie Dowling of Vinings and her 6-year-old grandson Oliver Hess of St. Petersburg, Fla., shop at the Crystal Organic Farm stand of Newborn at the Morningside Farmers Market in Atlanta.

Having shopped at this organic food market for 11 years, Barrington knows many of the farmers and trusts that they don't use prohibited pesticides, herbicides or chemicals.

She believes as many organic shoppers do: Trust the farmer, trust the food.

But what if the farmer is a stranger who works a thousand miles away? The demand in Georgia for organic food far exceeds the number of producers, so most of it comes from outside the state. How can you be certain that food that is labeled organic is truly organic?

The familiar green and white "USDA Organic" stamp means that the U.S. government certifies this food. Behind that label, however, is a federal agency with about 15 staff members who watch over an industry that sold \$23 billion in food in the U.S. last year.

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"I think it is largely effective but ... there are flaws," said Will Harris, who owns a certified organic beef farm in southwest Georgia called White Oak Pastures. Harris is especially concerned that the companies that inspect organic farmers do not apply the federal standards uniformly. Some are stringent and some lax, Harris said, and that can throw the program into question.

"The (National Organic Program) needs to be overhauled, quickly, before too many questions about the integrity of the program diminish its credibility," said Harris, who is also president of the organic industry advocacy group Georgia Organics.

Consumer watchdogs say the National Organic Program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agency charged with the greatest share of oversight, is overworked and understaffed. They assert, in addition, that the system of farm inspections raises concerns about conflicts of interest.

For example, to be labeled organic, the farm must be inspected by a certifying company. The farmer selects the certifier and also pays for the inspection.

"There could be a conflict of interest. If a [certifier] gives a company or farmer a bad audit, they may not get asked back," said Mike Doyle, director of the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety. "Is it the fox watching over the chicken house?"

Ensuring the authenticity of organic food is important for many reasons. Shoppers pay up to double the price for organic food. They also put great faith in the "USDA Organic" stamp, believing the food is better for them and the earth.

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Organic crops are raised without using most conventional pesticides, petroleum-based fertilizers or sewage sludge-based fertilizers, according to federal regulations. Meat and eggs must come from animals raised on organic feed, and farmers may not give those animals growth hormones or antibiotics.

"It just tastes better," said Barrington as she strolled through the Morningside market, which specializes in organic food.

She believes her organic diet helped her beat back cancer.

"If it weren't for organic food, [I] probably wouldn't be standing here," she said.

In the larger, more impersonal organic marketplace, farmers and industry advocates say the programs in place for monitoring food are effective.

Each year, private certifying companies, working on behalf of the federal program, inspect organic farms and food producers. The inspectors want to see documentation, and lots of it, farmers say: What are you planting, what nutrients are you putting in the soil, where are your receipts for the organic seeds, where are your records of crop rotation, how big is your buffer area from the next farm?

"It is a lengthy, involved process," said Bill Yoder, who runs the Yoder Family Farm in Canton. "The first year I did it, they found a piece of wood on my property. They said if this is treated wood, you can't have any around."

Organic food producers represent just a fraction of Georgia's giant agriculture industry. State agriculture officials point to a number of challenges, including a strong tradition in conventional farming and the difficulty of growing organic crops among the many bugs in South Georgia.

Still, organic food production is growing. Georgia has 196 certified organic farms and other organic food producers, such as those that make jams and jelly and coffee, a jump of 75 percent since 2005.

The Georgia Department of Agriculture plays a relatively minor role in watching over organic food and farming. The department requires producers to register annually and also to file a production plan.

Beyond that, oversight falls to the National Organic Program.

The NOP, as it is known, has too much to do and not enough people to do it, said Urvasi Rangan, a policy director at Consumers Union, the watchdog group.

To inspect and certify the organic farms and producers, the NOP works with 54 certifying companies in the U.S. and another 44 around the world. The agency audited these companies once every five years until last year, when it cut that interval to about every two years.

NOP acting director Barbara Robinson said she believes the agency does an adequate job. "You do the best you can with the budget you have," she said. She noted that President Barack Obama has proposed nearly doubling the agency's budget to \$6 million.

Last year, 15 of the 30 certifying companies that the program inspected had their requests for renewals deferred until they address "outstanding issues or proposed corrective action," NOP spokeswoman Joan Shaffer said.

The process of inspecting farms and producers also raises some eyebrows.

Doyle, the food safety expert at UGA, pointed out that the organic inspections do not check for food pathogens such as salmonella and E. coli. There is no educational requirement for the inspectors, nor is there a mandate that inspectors actually test the food to verify that it is organic.

As for the concerns about conflicts of interest during inspections, growers and advocates say that certifiers who break the rules risk their federal accreditation.

"It's a fair and complete system. ... There is integrity behind the [organic] label," said Vernon Mullins of the Georgia Crop Improvement Association, a major certifier in the state.

In the seven years since the federal organic standards took effect, the NOP has canceled the accreditation of two certifying companies in the U.S.

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Some watchdogs also see too much wiggle room amid the organic regulations.

Growers may shop around for an agreeable certifier, said George Boyhan, a professor of horticulture at the University of Georgia, which has a large agriculture program. "If you don't like something in the rules, call around and see if somebody else has a different interpretation of the rules," he said.

When trouble arises, Georgia agriculture officials help the feds investigate. But the Georgia Agriculture Department has a two-fold mission: It not only enforces the law in regard to agriculture, it also promotes the agriculture industry.

Oscar Garrison, the state agriculture's deputy commissioner for consumer protection, said that enforcement workers are a separate division from promotions workers to avoid conflicts of interest.

Many of the small organic farmers sell at a handful of food markets around metro Atlanta, and their business is fostered by their personal relationships with shoppers.

David Bentoski, who runs the organic D & A Farm in Zebulon, said his business depends on his reputation.

"If I don't do what I'm saying I do, I will cost myself the business I worked so hard to build," he said.

Tips for buying organic food

Organic food can cost up to twice the amount of conventional food. Here are some tips to help you get your money's worth.

- Look for the green and white circular "USDA Organic" label.
- If you are buying at a local farmer's market, ask the farmers how they avoid using harmful fertilizers and pesticides.
- Ask the farmer's market manager about the integrity of the farm.
- Grow organic food yourself.
- Turn to the [Georgia Organics Local Food Guide](#), which has phone numbers to find organic growers and descriptions of farms and farmer's markets.

Source: Georgia Organics

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