

**Workshop Title: Demystifying Labels: Understanding the Organic Claim**

**Speaker(s) & their titles:** Jodi Koberinski, Organic Council of Ontario's Executive Director (ON)

**Executive Summary**

In food production, labels are applied to give consumers an idea of what they are eating, and how it is produced. There has been a proliferation of labeling systems which sometimes leave consumers more confused than informed. Jodi Koberinski explains labels and buzzwords you might see on food packaging and clarifies what they mean (if anything). She also speaks about the recent efforts made to create mandatory national organic standards and the accompanying labeling. She explores where it succeeds, and its limitations.

**Detailed Notes**

- Background
  - Jodi has been the Executive Director of the Organic Council of Ontario since 2009
  - The Council aims to promote local organic food grown in Ontario
- People coming to organic farming: Biggest motivator is to avoid pesticides and herbicides.
- Organic farming is about being collectively responsible, but is not a perfect system.
- National organic certification label made in 2009 to represent product that meets organic standards. Voluntary label (Canada Organic logo) for mandatory standard if a product is certified organic in Canada.
- So many labels! make things confusing.
  - So many different standards in different regions, some have «localness» standards, and / or labor standards built in to labels
    - i.e. Fair trade, Rainforest Alliance, Local Food Plus, Atlantic Certified Organic, etc
  - The organic sector realised it needed to federally designate a symbol and standard to speak to the environmentally safe practices of organic agricultural products. With this focus, we lost pieces such as location, fair-trade, etc.
  - There is now one label to represent this Canada-wide status.
  - Sometimes you see a combination of the federal organic label with others to portray these lost pieces.
  - There are some watered down labels, but they are not necessarily bad – it's good to move people along the spectrum; doesn't have to be a black and white issue.

- There are efforts to simplify, but people like the local aspect; federal label works to simplify.
- At end of the day, the label is to provide assurance on how food is produced.
- Do people cheat in the organic system? Not in high numbers, but yes. But the risk to their business is very high and can ruin reputations. Not a perfect system but it works very well – the inspection process has caught people and stripped them of their certification.

Words you might find on labels :

- Natural
  - Applies to processing once in a processing facility; does not have anything to do with production.
  - Not much enforcement in this label; very little meaning.
- Local
  - Semi useful. Points to location.
  - Can be a very loose term. Local can mean different things in different places.
  - Doesn't need to be certified as much because it is more personal and generally people will have interactions with the farmers themselves at farmers' markets.
- Sustainable
  - Meaningless unless descriptor
  - No standard or enforcement
  - Can refer to many things :
    - Labor, society practice? Financial practice? Growing practices?
  - Approach, not prescription
  - Popular word used in large chain grocery stores
- Free range
  - Reaction to the industrial food system
  - Again, no standards or enforcement
  - Could be useful term for local farmer, but unfortunately term is abused and it ruins the term for legitimate free range producers.
- Ethical
  - Relates to consumer concerns over animal welfare
  - As stand-alone term has very little meaning
  - People have deep desire for animals to live « natural »
  - Would like to further develop standard that defines organic, and see more producers get certified.
  - There is space for deeply local communities that live outside large scale sweeping standards, but at same time it is important to lay down standards.
  - Getting farmers to comply with standards takes time, energy, and effort. Farmers must pay for these labels.

- Small bit of conflict between certifiers and farmers because of these costs. Looking for cost sharing with provincial governments (like NB and PEI offer) for added costs with going certified organic.
- Organic
  - Focus is soil health, while conventional approach to soil is just substrate that holds plants.
  - Some synthetic pesticides are okay, but cannot use persistent ones.
  - No irradiation or GMOs.
  - Mutagenesis – nuclear radiating seeds – are still around and sometimes used in organic agriculture (it is not regulated at all).
  - No synthetic fertilizers or fungicides.
    - Reduces impact on environment as nitrogen fertilizer is produced using natural gas (often times that which has been obtained through fracking).
    - Life cycle analysis reveals that converting a mid-size farm to organic is equivalent to taking 17 cars off the road (largely because of this reduction of fossil fuel-based fertilizers).
    - Organic is 20-60% more efficient than other conventional farm systems up to the farm's gate.
  - Animal Welfare and biodiversity – not focus of organic, but it is loosely involved.
- Organic can look a bit like industrial farming even when letter of rules are followed; it's not always what people think it is. Eggs would cost \$22 a carton if it was done in the way people would hope.
- Why no GMOs in organic ?
  - Involved in organic because people should have choice to avoid GMO.
  - Organic seeks to replicate natural systems and GMO does not fit into that picture.
  - Health Canada has never done any research on GMOs before saying they are safe.
  - Not a single GMO has been refused to enter market.
  - Main concern is that we don't know what we don't know about this product.
- « Think Before you Eat » campaign postcard
  - Only able to say that organic food does not include pesticides/GMOs.
  - Very finicky on what you can say with public money (don't want to say it is better than other forms of agriculture).
- Question: If organic is less energy intensive, why is it more expensive to produce ?
  - Many costs of conventional farming are externalised to other people.
  - Labor costs are higher.
  - Cannot produce as much per unit of space (number of animals permitted in a space outlined in the standards)

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- 70% of food controlled by 3 corporations – these grocery stores decide prices. Many conventional items are priced below cost of production as loss leader. Makes organic look even more expensive.
- When you buy conventional food from elsewhere, you could be eating pesticides that have been banned in Canada for a long time. This might make it cheaper, but is very risky.
- Also depends on what you buy; buying things in season makes organic cheaper sometimes.
- Food is more nutritional so you can eat less of it so it is actually less expensive (especially true of meat)!
- We only spend 10-20% on food – should be higher.