Is it Organic?

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In the Field

While at the Far West meeting this week in Pasco, Washington I was inspired to write my first blog – at least first for the new TFI website. Things workwise thankfully slow down a bit this time of year, but in addition, despite having numerous topics upon which I could potentially blog, I have been suffering from a bit of writers’ block.

To some degree I need to be inspired by the topic; such as the crazy carnival atmosphere at the previous climate meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Today’s general session presentation at meeting was given by Mischa Popoff, author of “Is It Organic?” Misha is a former organic farm inspector and history major that became disenchanted with the organic movement due to the prevalence of lack of true verification; political actions by environmental groups trying to push organic as the “only way”, and the important fact that well managed conventional systems not only align with food production needs but also often result in a lower environmental footprint.

As a former risk management specialist (oh, three careers ago…) I am intensely interested in risk-risk tradeoffs. A risk-risk tradeoff is an honest evaluation of the risks created by ameliorating risks elsewhere. These can be environmental; financial; or other - but always should be part of any thorough risk assessment. And if you compare the risks of consuming organic produce v. the risks of consuming conventional; taking into account potential exposure to life threatening pathogens, organic is many orders of magnitude more dangerous.

One need look no further than the recent e coli incident from organic sprouts grown in Saxony, Germany. Forty people died; over 1000 people had full or partial kidney failure; and over 3,000 were sickened. Most major media sources downplayed this huge story, and failed to definitively
link it to consumption of organic produce. And the similar incident in greens produced in CA; where again, many people were sickened from pathogen exposure from organic produce. The cause is never negligence or poor verification and inspection practices; in that instance it was attributed to feral swine trespassing in the fields. If so, then why doesn’t something similar happen in conventionally produced produce?

Mischa highlighted the fact that a large percentage of organic produce is grown in China and other countries without their own set of standards. USDA does not disclose the percentage of organic produce coming from outside the United States, but it likely approaches fifty percent. What about the fertilizer company in CA that for years was selling commercial nitrogen fertilizer as organic, as greens growers understand the value of pre-harvest N to finish the crop. That company paid a $10,000 fine!, dissolved, and reformed as another entity. What are they selling now?

For more information on the book or to purchase it directly from his website (it is self-published) please visit this link: http://www.isitorganic.ca/