

Rule Change Could Prompt Increase in Organic Hops

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TOPPENISH, Wash. (AP) — Call it a hops revolution.

Northwest farmers have begun planting new varieties of the key flavor ingredient in beer and working with researchers to develop ways to grow the crop without pesticides. The movement stems from a federal decision last year requiring brewers who label their beer as organic to use organic hops beginning in 2013.

Some say the U.S. Department of Agriculture's new rule could force organic craft brewers to tweak longtime recipes. Others believe the change will spark even more creativity among producers of organic beer, an industry that continues to gain speed.

Ultimately, it should mean that people who want to buy organic beer will find more choice in the beer aisle, though they might have to pay a few cents extra per bottle.

"The organic beer market is still relatively small, but it's definitely catching on," said Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, a nonprofit that promotes organic goods. "Just like a few years ago, organic cosmetics and body products were a niche. Across the board, whether it's pet food or whatever kind of consumer product, there's increasing demand."

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The U.S. is the world's second largest producer of hops, behind Germany, with more than a quarter of the world crop. Most are grown in the Northwest — where the craft beer movement hatched.

In central Washington's Yakima Valley, home to thousands of acres of crops from apples to mint, the hops industry celebrates its contribution to agriculture with an annual "fresh hop" ale festival complete with beer competitions and tastings, but only a few local growers have tried to tackle growing hops organically.

Brad Carpenter's family expanded their hops operation to include organic hops in 2000. They quit six years later.

Without chemicals, pests such as mites and aphids can damage the crop and reduce yields. Alternative methods to controlling pests also tend to be more expensive, making the organic crop costlier to produce.

And for many years, brewers could market their beer as organic even if they used conventional hops, arguing that organic hops simply weren't available.

Organic hops can be anywhere from 30 percent to 50 percent more expensive to brewers, so even if they could buy organic hops, many brewers opted for conventional varieties.

"We just didn't have enough market," Carpenter said.

Last year, the National Organic Standards Board, which advises the U.S. Agriculture Department, decided that organic brewers must use organic hops beginning in 2013, and the Carpenters are back in the organic business. About six acres of the farm are now planted in organic hops, comprising less than 1 percent of their total crop, but more will be planted in the future.

Carpenter is working with Fremont Brewing Co. of Seattle on test plots with new varieties and alternative growing methods for planting, managing and harvesting hops.

Other growers, both inside and outside the Northwest, also are boosting organic acreage, many in hopes of surpassing New Zealand as the world leader in organic hops production.

Some fear the changes won't keep up with demand in the short term. Hops generally take two years to come to full production.

"It's new territory for both brewers and growers," said Doug Hindman, brewer at Elliott Bay Brewing Co. in Seattle.

The company brews about a half-dozen organic, year-round beers, including its creamy No Doubt Stout and a classically hoppy Highline IPA, and a number of seasonal beers.

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The challenge will be finding varieties needed for his seasonal recipes, Hindman said.

"There are a couple of proprietary varieties that aren't grown organically now," he said. "That's not to say they won't be there in 2013, but I don't doubt that we're going to have to do some substitution and recipe modification."

However, Hindman also said the new rule has pushed hops growers and organic brewers to improve their communication, rather than rely on middlemen who handle hops sales.

"It's a good change," he said. "The growers, when they speak directly with brewers, can find out exactly what they need."

According to the Organic Consumers Association, organic beer accounts for only about \$50 million of the overall \$7 billion craft beer market, but the figure continues to steadily grow.

Research on the organic growing side and growth in the brewing side just means greater chance for innovation, said Jon Cadoux of Peak Organic Brewing Co. in Portland, Maine.

The brewery's beers, such as a malt-based black IPA called Hop Noir or a copper-colored Maple Oat Ale, have always been produced with organic hops, but some haven't always been exclusively organic.

"It means new incredible hops to play with, which is the fun part about brewing — the opportunity," Cadoux said.

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