Naturally Grown: An Alternative Label to Organic

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SCHAGHTICOKE, N.Y. (AP) — Justine and Brian Denison say they adhere to all the growing practices required for organic certification, yet if they label their beans and tomatoes "organic" at the farmer's market, they could face federal charges and $20,000 or more in fines.

From left, Julie Gardner, Walter Cameron and Lauren Ross-Hixson transplant lettuce in a field at Denison Farm in Schaghticoke, N.Y. on Monday, Aug. 12, 2013. Justine and Brian Denison adhere to all the growing practices required for organic certification, but if they label their beans and tomatoes "organically grown," they could face federal charges and $20,000 or more in fines. That's why they and hundreds of other small direct-marketing farms across the country have adopted an alternative label: Certified Naturally Grown. Certified farms pledge to follow organic practices, while avoiding the high fee and extensive paperwork required for the federal organic label. **(AP Photo/Mike Groll)**

Because the Denisons chose not to seek organic certification by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Denison Farm, which has been under organic management for more than 20 years, is banned from using that term. So they and hundreds of other small direct-marketing farms across the country have adopted an alternative label: Certified Naturally Grown.

Started by a group of organic farmers in New York's mid-Hudson Valley as a backlash against federal takeover of the organic program in 2002, Certified Naturally Grown has expanded over the past decade to include more than 700 farms in 47 states, executive director Alice Varon said.

"Certified Naturally Grown is tailored for direct-market farmers producing food without any synthetic chemicals specifically for their local communities," Varon said. "It's a particular niche of the agricultural world. It's not in direct competition with the national organic program."

Many small farmers previously certified organic by an independent organization have declined to participate in the federal program. They voice a variety of

objections: extensive record-keeping requirements; fees that can amount to 6 percent of a small farm's gross sales; and philosophical objections to joining a monolithic government-run program that also certifies huge operations that ship produce across the country.

"We have noticed over time that more and more farmers — often, younger farmers — who appear to be following organic practices don't bother to get certified," said Jack Kittredge, co-owner of a certified organic farm in Barre, Mass., and editor of "The Natural Farmer," journal of the Northeast Organic Farming Association. "My major concern is that sometimes, unless you're certified you're not even aware of some of the problems," such as calling livestock organic even though the animals eat feed containing genetically modified crops.

Atina Diffley, an organic farming consultant and author in Farmington, Minn., said alternative labels create confusion for customers. She said there are only about 13,000 USDA certified organic farms out of 2.2 million farms, and more organic farms are needed to bolster the movement's impact on national farm policy. "When farms have an alternative certification, they're not counted," she said.

Sam Jones, spokesman for USDA's organic certification program, said the agency doesn't comment on guidelines other than its own and doesn't take a position on whether alternative labels cause confusion. But he noted that growers are required by law to get federal certification if they want to sell their product as organic. Jones said USDA has a new program called "Sound and Sensible," aimed at reducing paperwork and other burdensome aspects of certification.

Ryan Voilland, co-owner of the certified organic Red Fire Farm in Granby, Mass., said the certification fees and paperwork aren't a big burden. He grows 100 acres of produce and has gross sales of about $2 million, and pays $2,000 a year for certification, of which $750 is returned in a federal rebate program. The premium price for organic produce far outweighs the fee, he said.

But farmers who opt for labels like Certified Naturally Grown and The Farmer's Pledge, sponsored by the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, say there's room for all the labels; some farms even boast several alternative labels in addition to USDA organic.

"The Farmer's Pledge is a better program for direct-sales farmers like me, who find the national organic program too burdensome," said Mark Dunau, who farms five acres in the Delaware County town of Hancock.

About 130 farmers in New York and Connecticut have signed The Farmers Pledge, a commitment to a broad set of farming principles that address labor issues, organic production practices, community values and marketing.

Farmers who participate in Certified Naturally Grown rely on peer inspection by other farmers to ensure they follow organic practices, such as avoiding synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and using cover crops and rotation for healthy soil. While critics say peer review rather than USDA-certified inspectors could lead to cutting

corners, Varon said that's unlikely.

"It's a different mindset that people bring to Certified Naturally Grown," Varon said. "They believe in farming in harmony with nature as an expression of their values. It's not something they do to get a premium in the marketplace."

Denison agrees. She and her husband operated a conventional farm in Maine before they bought the 164-acre farm in Schaghticoke, 20 miles northeast of Albany, in 2005. They switched to organic farming because they and their two daughters had developed illnesses they believed were caused by exposure to agricultural chemicals.

"We were one sick family," Denison said. "We were close to 50 when we bought this farm, but we were ready to change course and make a commitment to Certified Naturally Grown."

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