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## A Bad Summer for Organic Food

By Joseph D. Rosen, Ph.D.

The summer of 2008 has not been very good for the organic food industry. Below is a compendium of this summer's news items, followed by my remarks.

**June 20.** The season [starts with news](#) of a *Which?* report that a panel of 120 taste testers found no differences between organic and conventional strawberries although the former cost two to three times as much. (*Which?* is the UK equivalent of *Consumer Reports*.)

**July 6.** Researchers at Bristol University in the UK [find that organic chicken](#) is not as [tasty](#) as conventionally-raised chicken. (Many people buy organic food because they believe it tastes better, but whenever tests are conducted scientifically, no taste differences are found.)

**July 21.** The American Council on Science and Health publishes [an article](#) written by me that points out chapter and verse showing that there is no scientific evidence to support claims made by the Organic Center for the nutritional superiority of organic food, an organic food advocacy group funded mainly by the organic food industry to promote its products. A [reply from the Organic Center](#) to my article is [easily rebutted](#).

**July 24.** A [study](#) at the Harvard School of Public Health and published in *Human Reproduction* finds that soy foods may be responsible for low sperm counts. (For years, proponents of organic food have claimed that pesticides were responsible.)

**July 24.** An [investigation](#) by WJLA, a Washington DC TV station, finds illegal quantities of aldicarb, a very toxic pesticide, in Whole Foods' organic ginger. Further investigations reveal that the ginger was imported from China, as were [a number of other](#) organic vegetables sold by Whole Foods. Certification of the ginger was provided by Quality Assurance International (QAI), the largest organic certifier in the world. Since the Chinese government does not permit foreigners to inspect their farms, QAI subcontracts the actual inspections to Chinese nationals.


(Air and water pollution are severe problems in China, so even food grown under strict organic conditions is not necessarily free of pollutants such as lead and mercury. Organic consumers would do better to stop worrying about infinitesimally small residues of pesticides in their food and demand that food from China be tested for environmental pollutants before being sold in the United States.)

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**August 1.** Another article I wrote, "[Milking the Facts](#)," is published in the *Guardian*. The article shows that in spite of the large percentage increases in "healthy" milk nutrients found in milk from cows raised organically at Newcastle University, health-conscious consumers would need to drink up to 170 quarts of saturated-fat-laden organic milk every day to avail themselves of healthful quantities of all these nutrients.

**August 4.** In a [welcome respite](#) from the drumbeat of bad news, *Hotel Interactive* reports organic liquor is "poised" to be the next food and beverage trend. (Organic cigarettes will probably follow.)

**August 6.** The Organic Consumers Association (OCA), a pro-organic food advocacy group, issues an alert that fifteen of the thirty organic certifiers inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture [failed the audit](#). (Organic consumers should take heart, however, if they think one out of two isn't that bad.)

**August 6.** Whole Foods announces a [31% decline](#) in third-quarter profits from a year earlier. The shares close at \$20.04 on the New York Stock Exchange, about 72% below their price at the start of 2007.

**August 8.** [Tesco](#), the largest seller of organic food in the UK, announces price reductions of up to 25% for certain organic foods because of growing consumer resistance to high prices.

**August 8.** Research conducted at the University of Copenhagen [demonstrates](#) "no clear difference in the vitamin and mineral content of crops grown organically and those using legally permitted levels of fertilizers and pesticides."

**August 9.** An article in the *Calgary Herald* raises serious [questions about the accountability and credibility](#) of claims by Canadian organic food proponents.

**August 9.** Health officials in Massachusetts [link seven illnesses](#) from *E. Coli* contamination of ground beef sold at Whole Foods markets. According to [news reports](#), Whole Foods purchased this meat from Coleman Natural Foods, a company that, according to its website, "offers a full line of natural and organic fresh meat and prepared foods." The moral of this story is clear. *E. coli* contamination is difficult to control in the meat packing industry, and it doesn't seem to make much difference if the meat is organic or conventional. Breakouts of this dangerous organism, which can cause kidney failure and death (mostly in children and the aged), have occurred repeatedly. Isn't it time that the organic food industry drops its ill-conceived opposition to food irradiation?

**August 17.** Phil Woolas, the environment minister of the UK, [challenges](#) the Prince of Wales to provide evidence that genetically modified foods are a "disaster" and states that government ministers have a responsibility to base policy on science. (And not monarchical pseudo-science.)

**August 19.** [Nina Federoff](#), a Professor of Biology at the University of Pennsylvania and recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Science, tells the *New York Times*, "If everybody switched to organic farming, we couldn't support the earth's current population -- maybe half."

**August 21.** The FDA, at long last, [permits irradiation](#) of spinach and iceberg lettuce despite organic food industry objections. (According to the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, irradiation of organic food is illegal. Now consumers who think that organic food is healthier will have to choose between, on one hand, the theoretical risks from pesticides in food and genetically

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modified organisms -- there being not one case of proven human illness from them -- and, on the other hand, food poisoning, which is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control to cause about 76 million illnesses and 5,000 deaths every year.)

**September 4.** *Time* magazine claims that if American agriculture went completely organic we would need 40 million instead of 1 million farmers to feed us.

**September 8.** Sir David King, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, [castigates](#) aid agencies in the US and Western Europe for encouraging African farmers to continue use of organic agricultural techniques -- "with devastating consequences."

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