

The Choice is Simple: Choose Organic Apples

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Continuous improvement is the mainstay of organic agriculture. Unlike any other system of food production or product label, “improvements” are integral to the continued success of organic. In fact, the expectation that organic production systems will continually improve is woven into the very fabric of the organic law—the [Organic Foods Production Act](#) (OFPA).

One of the ways improvement happens is when a synthetic substance temporarily approved for use in organic is phased-out. That’s exactly what occurred earlier this month when the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) [\[1\]](#) voted to end the allowance of streptomycin, an antibiotic used to fight a persistent bacteria that threatens organic apple and pear orchards.

Antibiotics have never been permitted in organic agriculture with the singular exception of apple and pear production. Since the inception of OFPA, meat and dairy producers have been forbidden to use any antibiotics of any kind. Yet, early in the development of organic regulations, policy makers temporarily allowed both streptomycin and tetracycline as the exception to the organic rule to combat fire blight, a destructive bacteria that attacks tree blossoms, limbs, and shoots. Last year, tetracycline was [banned](#) and now, with the NOSB’s latest vote to rid organic of streptomycin, all uses of antibiotics in organic have been completely eliminated. That’s the beauty of the continuous improvement model.

Consumers buy organic food because it’s a healthy alternative to the many overly processed foods on the market, most of which contain synthetic additives, preservatives, hormones, and dyes. They also do not expect their organic fruit to be grown with the use of antibiotics, much like they do not expect it to be irradiated, genetically engineered, sprayed with persistent toxic pesticides, or fertilized with toxic sewage sludge. Even knowing this, regulators were persuaded by organic apple and pear growers to temporarily allow the spraying of antibiotics in their orchards until suitable alternatives were identified to manage the highly destructive fire blight problem. But such exemptions are only temporarily, according to OFPA. And, organic’s underlying tenet of continuous improvement provided the basis for the NOSB to decide to force an end to antibiotic use, based upon stakeholder input and evidences about available alternatives.

Like many, CFS felt that it took far too long to get antibiotics out of organic given their inherent incompatibility with organic systems. Research on preventative strategies for orchard and biological controls were slow to emerge and stakeholder pressure and public awareness to eliminate antibiotics built gradually over time. Mounting evidence that antibiotic use inevitably leads to the development of [antibiotic resistant bacteria](#) and decreases the effectiveness of the

drug to combat infections made the need stop allowing them more urgent. Equally important was the robust multi-stakeholder, public participation process—so central to organic’s continuous improvement mandate—which helped facilitate an end to antibiotics in organic once and for all. That includes more than 50,000 people who signed CFS’ petition calling for the elimination of antibiotics in organic.

It’s a good reminder and worth noting that continuous improvements in a discernible sector of food production never happen, except in organic. And, even though organic is [the healthiest system](#) of food production and the most beneficial for the environment, wildlife, climate, and biodiversity, organic keeps getting better all the time.

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[1] The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) is a voluntary, 15 member stakeholder Board appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture to give ongoing advice on the implementation of the National Organic Program (NOP). The NOSB is also the gatekeeper of synthetic materials in organic and it recommends to the Secretary which substances should be temporarily allowed and which ones should be phase-out after evaluating the evidence on available alternatives.