

Watchdog Agency Moves Out of DC as Corruption/Fraud Necessitates Reinventing the USDA Organic Certification Program

Veteran Policy Experts Move Organic Industry Watchdog Agency from DC to Wisconsin — USDA Failures Necessitate Reinventing the Federal Certification Program

LA FARGE, WISCONSIN, UNITED STATES, March 31, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- OrganicEye, a public interest group best known as one of the country's preeminent organic industry watchdogs, has [announced](#) its move from the "sausage-making capital of the world," Washington, DC, to one of the epicenters of organic farming and food production on the West Coast of Wisconsin.



The farm policy research group, which began as a project of Beyond Pesticides in 2019 and became a fully independent, tax-exempt public charity on March 1, 2022, will continue to focus on defending the "time-honored philosophy and legal definition of organic farming and food production."

“

Based on my extensive collaboration with the NOP, Justice Department, and FBI in helping bust the largest frauds in the history of the organics virtually none of them come out of annual inspections.”

Mark Kastel of OrganicEye

As organic agriculture and food marketing has grown into an over \$60 billion industry, corporate agribusiness has used its influence within the USDA—and many certification agencies it oversees—to shift primary organic production from family-scale farms to large livestock factories, massive hydroponic/soilless greenhouses, and imports that have all too often proven fraudulent.

“We are happy to announce that OrganicEye will continue to be led by Mark Kastel,” stated Jim

Gerritsen, one of the elders in the organic farming movement and newly elected president of the OrganicEye board. Kastel, who has run OrganicEye since its beginning and was one of the founders of The Cornucopia Institute, brings over 35 years of diverse involvement in the industry. His background includes work as a certified agricultural producer, business development consultant, and registered lobbyist, making Kastel one of the most experienced independent fraud investigators in the organic industry.

Research and public pressure spearheaded by Kastel has compelled the USDA, Justice Department, and FBI to take several major enforcement actions resulting in decertification, jail terms, fines, suicides, and millions of dollars in settlements of class-action lawsuits related to consumer fraud. His efforts have also been instrumental in helping bust large international crime syndicates laundering conventional commodities as “organic.”

“Mark’s knowledge is widely respected in the organic farming community and by key high-integrity business leaders, while, at the same time, feared and reviled by powerful interests profiting from the weakening of organic standards,” Gerritsen added. “With Mark’s leadership, we will amplify the voices of committed organic stakeholders who share our sense of urgency to stop the degradation of the environment and health, with organic as a critical piece of the solution.”

“By being independent, and based in Wisconsin, we will be able to lower our cost of operations, simplify our donor-relations (tax-deductible checks can now be made out directly to “OrganicEye”), and be thoroughly immersed in our agrarian, organic community where there is lots to share between farmers, business entrepreneurs, and eaters,” stated Kastel. “We can’t thank our individual donors, foundation-funders, and sponsors enough for helping us become financially stable and independent—and poised to have an even greater impact.”

Gerritsen is a well-known and respected leader in the organic farming movement in his own



(L to R) Executive Director Mark Kastel with board members: Bill Heart, Will Fantle, and Jim Gerritsen



right. A certified organic seed potato farmer from Bridgewater, Maine, he might be best known as president and co-founder of Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association (OSGATA) and the lead plaintiff in 'OSGATA et al. v. Monsanto.'

[Gerritsen and Kastel are joined in OrganicEye leadership](#) by industry veterans Will Fantle and Bill Heart.

The primary focus of OrganicEye's work will remain the same. Kastel, who serves as the Executive Director of OrganicEye, stated, "You don't have to take my word for the need of this organization's work, based on the inadequacy of enforcement actions by the USDA's [National Organic Program](#). With the backdrop of thousands of cases of fraud submitted to the NOP, there is a legacy of independent audits by the agency's Office of Inspector General (OIG) criticizing their oversight of certifiers and poor record of bringing fraudulent operations to justice."

Although OrganicEye has appealed to USDA Secretary Thomas Vilsack for a systemic shift at its National Organic Program, away from a disproportionate reliance on the industry's trade-lobby group, the Organic Trade Association, Secretary Vilsack recently appointed the former general legal counsel and head lobbyist at the OTA to oversee organic and emerging markets in his office. Additionally, analysis by OrganicEye shows that the majority of the members of the National Organic Standards Board, created by Congress to buffer organic rulemaking from the influence of corporate lobbyists, have formal relationships with the OTA.

OrganicEye has announced that in 2022 they will be aggressively promoting their thesis that the tens of millions of dollars that are invested each year by taxpayers, farmers, and businesses in the certification process are not catching the scofflaws. "Based on our experience," Kastel said, "almost none of the major fraud investigations have started with annual inspections." OrganicEye's first-hand involvement has found they are most often instigated by current or former employees, former spouses, or competitors "ratting-out" the perpetrators. "We need to fundamentally reallocate the funding to more effectively catch these offenders," Kastel added.

In addition to the scores of industry "intelligence agents" with whom Kastel has worked over the past 18 years as the organic industry's best-known watchdog, OrganicEye has established a toll-free hotline, 1-844-EYE-TIPS (844-393-8477), to help facilitate tips from the public.

"We are not in the rumor business. Intel has to be verified with additional witnesses, documentation, photographs, or other evidence," Kastel added. "We encourage stakeholders to come forward if they have firsthand knowledge concerning fraud which damages the value of the organic label for all those producing food in an honest and ethical manner."

The organization emphatically stated that the identity of all whistleblowers and tipsters will be held in strict confidence.

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“Here’s the bottom line,” stated OrganicEye’s Mark Kastel. “Private certifiers have an economic disincentive to do aggressive enforcement. And inspectors are all too often well-intentioned young folks with no experience in production agriculture or forensic accounting going toe-to-toe with seasoned veterans who are going to have their lunch every day if the intent is to perpetrate fraud.”

OrganicEye believes shifting to a more effective program could be done in a cost/revenue-neutral manner. “Our vision is that comprehensive audits would be conducted every five years by industry-veterans with production agriculture experience and knowledge in fiscal fraud investigations,” stated Kastel.

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