SITUATION

The National Organic Program was established by Congress to ensure consistency and legitimacy in applying organic production claims to food product labels. Congress laid the groundwork for organic livestock products by setting parameters around how animals could be fed and when and what types of medications could be used. While the National Organic Standards Board can recommend to the Secretary of Agriculture changes or additions to the program, they should be germane to the organic act. In April 2016, USDA proposed amending the act to “create greater consistency in organic livestock and poultry practices.” Among the proposed rule’s provisions were ones that would: clarify how producers and handlers must treat livestock and poultry to ensure their health and well-being throughout life, including transport and slaughter; specify which physical alterations are allowed and prohibited in organic livestock and poultry production; and establish minimum indoor and outdoor space requirements for poultry. But livestock industry-driven animal care and handling standards, such as the National Pork Board’s Pork Quality Assurance Plus program, already exist, and the programs can much more rapidly accommodate new practices and procedures that promote animal health and welfare than a federal rule could.

In comments on the rule submitted to USDA, NPPC pointed out that animal welfare is not unique to organic production: “Adoption of these specified practices by organic producers will in no way differentiate them from non-organic producers also utilizing them; they do not in any substantive way make the resulting products more ‘organic’ as the term is commonly understood in the agricultural community.” Additionally, the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) has been charged with developing international animal welfare standards, including ones for pigs, which are still under development. NPPC also recommended that no on-farm production, housing or handling requirements for organic production – or otherwise – be finalized until an international standard has been adopted.

NPPC POSITION

NPPC supports withdrawal of the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices rule. It is outside the scope of the Organic Food Production Act of 1990, which limited consideration of livestock as organic to feeding and medication practices.

FAST FACTS

- USDA’s animal welfare standards for the National Organic Program, if implemented, would be the first time such standards are codified in federal law and would present serious challenges to livestock producers
- There are a number of problems with the new standards, including:
  - Animal production practices have nothing to do with the basic concept of “organic”
  - The standards add complexity to the organic certification process, creating significant barriers to existing and new organic producers
  - They could jeopardize animal and public health

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