



## Small Bites

October 8, 2008

### Agricultural Debate: **Active vs. Passive Organic Farming**

What goes into a Farmer's decision to become "Certified Organic?"

The following information is based on a discussion with Jeff Rast from Prairie Sun Farms. Carol and Jeff Rast's farm was certified organic for many years, but they recently decided not to continue with the USDA's lengthy and costly certification process. Now, even though their practices haven't changed, they can't label their products "Organic." Jeff explains two different types of organic farming: **Passive and Active**. Many industrial farms are certified organic but practice the minimum "passive" technique thereby limiting the health of their land and product in doing so. Idaho's Bounty certified producers practice the "active" organic farming techniques as described below.

**Passive Organic Farming** To become certified organic, there are many products and practices that you cannot use or follow. However, with large agricultural firms wanting to enter the organic market, there has been a lot of lobbying to allow certain products to be used, even though they may not be all-natural.

A passive organic farmer doesn't necessarily pay close enough attention to the health of the land, and may allow it to deteriorate or become overgrown with noxious weeds. All the farmer must do to keep their certification is follow the minimum requirements set forth by the government and fill out the appropriate paperwork each year. These minimum requirements are strict, for example, there are no pesticides or herbicides allowed among other chemicals and genetic modifications, but they do not require the "active" farming practices that generally nurse the land to maintain its richness for generations.

**Active Organic Farming** Active organic farming is based on the premise that the entire ecosystem is interconnected, a sentiment explained beautifully by Aldo Leopold: "The land is one organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the co-operations. You can regulate them- cautiously - but not abolish them."

An active farmer monitors the entire ecosystem on their farm, including soil health and biological cycles, which requires a lot of time, "a high eyes to acres ratio," as Jeff describes it. It's very hard to do on a large scale, and can get away from you easily since there are so many different components.

Active organic farmers must closely monitor the health of the soil – it's the foundation of a healthy farm - and build it up with natural inputs and practices. They must know when to rotate crops to promote soil health, add compost, manure or gypsum, or plant crops that will regenerate the soil when their vegetative matter is plowed back into the soil, such as alfalfa or clovers. They also know when to give the fields a year off to regain nutrients.

Active organic farmers also work to attract insects that benefit their crops. They may plant a garden specifically to attract ladybugs (natural controls) to keep the aphid population in check. They may have a perennial garden area for insects to feed on. They use natural herbicides, such as vinegar, or they weed by hand with a hoe, or use flaming.

Active organic farming means making sure all parts of a local ecosystem are working together. It is a very labor-intensive way to farm since it can't be very industrialized, but since it promotes the health of the entire ecosystem and is sustainable, it is done out of a sense of mission.

Active organic farming creates and promotes nutrient rich and healthy food, land, animals and water. For Carol and Jeff, knowing that they're contributing to the health of their land and community is satisfaction enough, and they can live without having an "organic" label on their produce.

### *Imagine ...*

- + Knowing where your food comes from, who is producing it, and their ethics and farming practices
- + Working in support of the health of your local community food shed  
 where energy stays local and supports our rural economy

