

The Fight For Real USDA Organic Standards!

Government to limit use of organic label on some products

■ **Personal care products, cosmetics among items that will lose certification**

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON - If you want a lotion, soap or lip balm free of chemicals and synthetics, you should read the fine print. The Agriculture Department is taking its round, green "USDA Organic" label off personal care products and cosmetics.

When it created the seal in 2002, the primary intent was to certify the organic claims made by food producers, such as that meat came from animals raised without antibiotics and not confined indoors, or that vegetables were grown without pesticides.

But the department also opened the door to making a wide range of other products eligible for the label: cosmetics and personal care items, pet food, dietary supplements, textiles like cotton T-shirts and fish.

"The feeling was, if your product

was composed of agricultural ingredients, and you thought you could get certified, you were welcome to try," said Barbara Robinson, head of the department's National Organic Program.

Three years later, the department decided it had gone too far. In April, it began telling companies their cosmetics and other personal care products can't be government-certified as organic, after all.

Fish and pet food are also off the table, but only for now. The department is creating task forces to make rules for certifying them. Still being decided is whether dietary supplements can use the seal.

"As time went by, and legal counsel in the department and senior policy officials took a closer look, they determined that wouldn't really stand up in a court of law," Robinson said.

That's bad news to Nancy Piersel of Finland, Minn. She looks for organic seal because she has a disorder called multiple chemical sensitivity, which causes allergy-like

symptoms when she's exposed to many substances.

The seal "gave me more confidence to try that product," said Piersel, 48. She makes her own lip gloss and, before the seal became available, would call companies to find out more about ingredients before buying something new.

"I have to be very careful about what I use, because my skin reacts to a lot of things. I get rashes and burning, itching - the same kind of thing you'd get if you had a bad skin reaction to any product," Piersel said. "Now that I won't have those labels, I'll have to do more digging."

The department's reversal also is frustrating to companies that spent money and time to put the seal on their products. An Agriculture Department-authorized agent must certify a company before it can use the seal or label something "100 percent organic" or "organic."

David Bronner, president of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, said his company spent some \$100,000 to ensure that his soaps, lotions and lip

balms met the standards for using the seal.

Bronner said consumers are confused by the myriad products that claim to have "organic" or "natural" ingredients. The USDA seal guaranteed his products are free of chemicals and synthetic ingredients, he said.

"Everyone in the world's making an organic claim," Bronner said. "We're not doing tricks. We actually work really hard to make real, organic ingredients. The National Organic Program is what consumers trust."

Organic means a product contains all-natural, nonsynthetic substances that are grown without using conventional pesticides or fertilizer, biotechnology or radiation. And it means meat and dairy products have come from animals raised on organic feed, given access to the outdoors and never given antibiotics or growth hormones.

The Organic Consumers Association, to which Piersel belongs, is asking the Agriculture

Department to take another look at removing its seal from personal care products.

The association says the reversal hurts small companies in particular, because the seal is part of a marketing program that gives them an edge. Bigger companies can't find the volume of organic ingredients they would need to make certified organic shampoo or other products, the group says.

Beyond that, the group argues that personal care products use the same ingredients as those in organic food.

"Certified organic olive oil does not magically become nonorganic if it is used as a massage oil instead of on a salad," said Ronnie Cummins, executive director of the association.

Robinson, however, said the department won't change its mind again without an act of Congress. The 1990 law creating the organic program - the Organic Foods Production Act - was not intended to cover products besides food, she said.

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