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Furor erupts over changes to US organic standards

Political influence exerted by a US poultry producer results in a law that weakens the National Organic Program's ability to enforce standards requiring 100% organic livestock feed.

On 13 February, less than four months after the implementation of the National Organic Program, the United States Congress passed legislation permitting organic livestock to be fed non-organic feed when organic feed is twice the price of conventional feed. The provision was appended as a 'rider' to a 3,000-page federal spending bill. It occurred during last minute negotiations by J. Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House, at the request of Representative Nathan Deal. Deal proposed the provision to help Fieldale Farms, a chicken processing company in Deal's home state of Georgia. The farm had been working through other avenues to make this change since last summer. The rider became law when President Bush signed the Omnibus Appropriations Bill.

The rider affects the change to production standards indirectly – it eliminates the funding for the NOP's enforcement of the existing standard that requires 100% organic feed. The 'exemption' would apply when the supply of organic feed is inadequate to meet current market demands at prices that are not more than twice the cost of conventionally produced feed. The provision relies on an analysis of feed supply and price previously ordered from the USDA by Congress. Alisa Harrison, a department spokes-

woman, said that study is being done now but she did not know when it would be completed.

After infuriating organic food advocates by failing to take a stand against the rider, on 25 February, Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman criticised the legislation and called for maintaining the standards:

'The National Organic Program is the product of 10 years of hard work and development by many interested parties with an extensive amount of public input. The program has benefited from bipartisan support from inception through publication of final program requirements which were implemented late last year.

I am concerned that the language inserted in the Omnibus Appropriations Act could weaken the National Organic Program. It is important to maintain a strong organic program that ensures the integrity of the organic label placed on consumer products. The best way to do that is by maintaining the organic standards as we implemented them in October 2002. I support bipartisan efforts to ensure those USDA standards remain in place.

Since becoming Secretary I have worked to implement the National Organic Standards rule, ensured the standards met consumer expectations, and made every effort to prevent those