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US Capitol Hill shenanigans and organics

During February 2003, 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 had been appended as a 'rider' to a 3,000-page federal spending bill during last minute negotiations by J. Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House, at the request of Representative Nathan Deal. Deal's district contains a chicken processing company that has attempted to have this change made since last summer. The rider became law when President Bush signed the Omnibus Appropriations Bill.

On 3 April, only 54 days after its passage, the law created by the rider was repealed. This action occurred after an intensive campaign by the Organic Trade Association (OTA), the National Campaign for Organic Agriculture, the National Organic Coalition, and other allied groups whose organising efforts resulted in the USDA being deluged with thousands of phone calls, letters, and faxes expressing opposition to the provisions of law.

The mechanism used to affect the repeal was the Leahy-Craig Amendment to the Senate version of the Supplemental Appropriations Bill. Crafted by Senator Patrick Leahy (Vermont) and Senator Larry Craig (Idaho), the amendment called for repeal of Section 771 of the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 2003, the portion of the new law that housed the text of the 'organic feed rider'. The success of

this effort was due to the overwhelming support for the measure garnered though the organic supporters' lobbying efforts. There were 52 co-sponsors to the Leahy-Craig Amendment – over half of the members of the United States Senate.

In spite of this victory, the organic proponents' celebration was muted by the news that the acceptance of the amendment to repeal the feed law was contingent upon the Senators' agreement to expand the organic language to create a dual provision that added text mandating the creation of organic standards for wild seafood. This concept was introduced by Appropriations Chairman Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, a long time-proponent of expanding organic standards to allow organic labelling of Alaska's wild-caught salmon.

At Stevens' request, the idea of creating standards for organic labelling of wild seafood was discussed extensively by the public and USDA in 2000 and 2001, and had been rejected at that time. During the earlier discussions both the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) and OTA expressed opposition to allowing wild fish to be labelled as organic on the grounds that it is impossible to certify. As a result of Stevens' power role as chair of the Committee, the issue will now be reopened and put before the public for comment as a proposed rule. The Stevens' amendment states:

'Notwithstanding the requirement of section 2107(a)(1)(A) requiring