

The New York Times

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2005

Is It Organic? Well Maybe

Confusion, still, over makeup.



Tony Cenicola
The New York Times

Many consumers are confused because they assume organic means gentle, safe and healthy.



Margaret Reigel

BRINGING IN THE FEDS

Dr. Bronner's, the maker of soaps with organic oils, helped force the Agriculture Department to apply its organic foods standards to beauty products.

Hundreds of soaps, shampoos and skin creams call themselves organic, but their labels have long been confusing, even misleading. A moisturizing cream might be made with organic kiwi, strawberries, jojoba oil and aloe vera, but then mixed with synthetic preservatives. No government agency checked whether the ingredients were truly organic.

But now the Agriculture Department is applying its strict organic food standards to personal care products too. Two months ago, after years of wavering, the agency's National Organic Program declared that cosmetics can also be labeled with the familiar round, two-toned "U.S.D.A. Organic" seal.

Theoretically this is good news to the

large and growing population of consumers who spent \$4 billion last year for beauty products labeled natural or organic, often paying more for the satisfaction of buying products they consider pure or healthy. Megan Slate, 56, of Manhattan said that for her organic soaps and lotions were the third step in a progression away from synthetic substances that began with alternative medicines and organic foods.

"I also realize that it can be more labor-intensive, that you have to be careful about the source, that the shelf life might be a little shorter," Mrs. Slate said. "I understand both sides, and I choose organic."

But much confusion is likely to remain over the Agriculture Department seal because so few organic beauty products are expected to qualify for it. Government licensed certifiers must examine the formulas of the products and determine that at least 95 percent of the ingredients are organic. Many more products will end up labeled "made with organic" ingredients, a murkier designation. Some products

that do not meet even the lower standard could possibly still use "organic" in their trademark names. And the new regulations can do nothing to clear up whether an organic beauty product is always a good thing.

The government's extension of the organic seal was forced by a lawsuit brought by one of the oldest, most colorful makers of natural soaps, Dr. Bronner's, whose labels crammed with free adaptations of the wisdom of Longfellow, Chaucer and Confucius have amused bathers for years. "Enjoy sink body rub to stimulate body-mind-soul-spirit" is a typical label direction.

In June, Dr. Bronner's, based in Escondido, Calif., joined with the Organic Consumers Association, an advocacy group, in a suit against the Agriculture Department to include personal care products in the organic certification program, which was limited to food. Since 2002 foods both fresh and packaged — tree ripened pears or bottled herbal salad dressings — can be labeled organic only if they are made of farm products grown without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, geneti

The Seal Says They're Organic

In the two months since the Department of Agriculture agreed to certify beauty products as "organic" (95 to 100 percent organic) or "made with organic" (up to 95 percent organic), only a few brands have actually begun using the government-associated labels. Here are some examples.

NOURISH ORGANIC CUCUMBER & WATER-CRESS FACE WASH (95 to 100 percent organic) contains organic chamomile tea and soybeans, aloe vera, sweet orange and watercress oils.

NOURISH ICE MINT & VANILLA MASSAGE BAR (95 to 100 percent organic) has organic shea butter, beeswax, coconut oil, vanilla extract and peppermint pure essential oil.

DR. BRONNER'S ALL-ONE HEMP ROSE PURE-CASTILE SOAP (at least 70 percent organic) contains organic coconut, palm, olive, hemp and jojoba oils.

DR. BRONNER'S & SON DOG'S MAGIC PEPPERMINT ORGANIC LIP BALM (95 to 100 percent organic) contains organic avocado oil, beeswax and jojoba, hemp and peppermint oils.

Photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

DR. BRONNER'S AND ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION FIGHT FOR REAL ORGANIC STANDARDS

cally engineered seeds or irradiation.

Dr. Bronner's argued that organic olive oil does not become nonagricultural just because it is used in massage oil rather than in salad dressing. On August 23, the eve of a deadline for the agency to respond to the lawsuit, its National Organic Program issued a memo to organic certifiers that it would now include beauty products.

"The U.S.D.A. decided that the content is what matters in a product, not end use." Said Joan Shaffer, speaking for the National Organic Program. "Any agricultural product, regardless of its end use, that meets the N.O.P. standards and is certified may be labeled according to its organic content."

David Bronner, the president of Dr. Bronner's, said that without the government's action the word "organic" on cosmetics would not be meaningful. "The cosmetic industry is so full of hype in a bottle." Mr. Bronner said, "It's such a marketing-driven industry, and it's just kind of a corrosive influence on the organic program."

Dr. Bronner's has already put the organic seal on its Sun Dog's lotions and balms. Two other brands already using the seal are the Nourish line of body and face washes, moisturizers and deodorant (made by Sensibility Soaps in Beaver Falls, Pa.) and Aubrey Organics, which makes organic "body polish," massage oils and lotions. Terressential in Middletown, MD., which sells organic cleansers, shampoos and skin lotions, is having its skin and hair products certified.

Yet many organic products are less than 95 percent organic and will not get the seal. Dr. Bronner's soaps, for example, are labeled "made with organic oils," because their main ingredient is made, as soap has been for centuries, by mixing an alkali (sodium hydroxide) with oil and water. No alkali remains in the finished soaps, Mr. Bronner said, but because it is used in production it must be counted as

an ingredient.

Some products mix synthetic and organic ingredients because the synthetics do things that organics cannot. "It's really very hard to make a shampoo or a skin-care product that is 95 percent organic," said Morris Shriftman, the senior vice president of Avalon Organics. "There are ingredients in those products that are not organic, and those are the things that clean your skin or get under the grime that is in your hair."

In shampoos and soaps, rich lather, clean scent and long shelf life often come courtesy of synthetic surface-active substances, perfumes and preservatives. Moisturizers, for their part, often contain petroleum, and emollients like dimethicone.

Synthetic ingredients used in cosmetics are generally considered safe. The Food and Drug Administration requires that cosmetics makers make sure that their products are safe. And because each synthetic ingredient is typically used in a small amount, product users experience very low levels of exposure. Some synthetic ingredients, however, can be irritating to extrasensitive skin. And some have been linked in preliminary studies on rodents and humans to possible health problems when used in large amounts.

Certain studies have suggested, for example, that phthalates, which are used in making fragrances, lotions, shampoos and nail polish, may be associated with changes in male reproductive development. Others have indicated that parabens, which are preservatives, mimic the activity of estrogen in cells, and that has led to the hypothesis that they may be associated with breast cancer. The research remains inconclusive and controversial.

Andrew Jacobson, the president of the personal care division of Hain Celestial, the maker of Jason Natural Personal Care products, said it is more important for products to be safe and effective than for them to be 95 to 100 percent organic. His

company and Avalon are among some 200 that have joined the Campaign For Safe Cosmetics, which advocates the removal from beauty products of any ingredients suspected to be carcinogens, reproductive toxins or mutagens.

Whenever a product carries the label "made with organic" ingredients, said Ronnie Cummins, the national director of the Organic Consumers Association, "consumers have to dig a little deeper for information and look at the back of the bottle." The word hydrosols: high on the list should raise suspicion about the amount of organic ingredients in a product, Mr. Cummins said, because it may in some cases be just a fancy word for water.

Water is not considered an organic ingredient, according to government standards, but hydrosols, the water collected when herbs or flowers are steam distilled, are. A manufacturer could therefore bulk up on hydrosols made with certified organic ingredients to justify a 70 percent organic claim.

Aloe vera is likewise used in large amounts in some products to boost the organic content to 70 percent, Mr. Cummins said.

Brands that have the word "organic" as part of their name may also be confusing to consumers, especially if their products are not even 70 percent organic. The National Organic Program does not categorically forbid this practice. The preamble to its regulations states that the word "organic" in a brand name "does not inherently imply an organic production or handling claim and, thus, does not inherently constitute a false or misleading statement."

That bothers Mr. Cummins as well as purists in the natural industry. Mr. Bronner said he hoped the organic industry itself would limit use of the word in the names of beauty products. If it does not, he said, he will consider challenging the practice in court.

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UPDATE - November 2005

DR. BRONNER PASSED AWAY IN 1997, BUT HIS FAMILY IS CARRYING OUT HIS VISION TO A FAR GREATER EXTENT THEN HE COULD DO ALONE AND BLIND.

WE ARE CARRYING OUT TWO OF HIS BASIC PRINCIPLES:

1. CONSTRUCTIVE CAPITALISM IS WHERE YOU SHARE THE PROFIT WITH THE WORKERS AND THE EARTH...FROM WHICH YOU MADE IT!
2. WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS BECAUSE OF ONE ETERNAL, EVER LOVING FATHER.

We are now selling over five million bottles and bars with very little marketing. 30 to 50% of our profit has been used to fight for industrial hemp, for meaningful organic standards and helping over 20 "human charities" (we can hug the people in charge) all over the earth: from freshwater wells in Ghana, orphanages in Haiti and China, to helping "street women" become nursing assistants in Nigeria.

Our workers have almost complete medical coverage with no deductions and received bonuses of 15 to 60 thousand dollars each for the past 3 years. By next year you will find new skin care products such as Dr. Bronner's & Sundog Magic lotions and lip balms (we have acquired this wonderful company and improved the products) as well as ALL our body soaps will be organic.

Thanks for making all this possible by buying our products and spreading the word!

THE BRONNER FAMILY