

Organic Farms Unknowingly Treated with Synthetic Fertilizers

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California Liquid Fertilizer is a supplier of inexpensive fertilizer, approved by organic regulators. By 2006, it held as much as a third of the market in California.

Liquid fertilizers work particularly well for cool weather crops like strawberries and salad greens, and market leaders Earthbound and Driscoll's were big customers for California Liquid Fertilizer.

But a state investigation caught the California Liquid Fertilizer, a Salinas-area company spiking its product with ammonium sulfate, a synthetic fertilizer banned from organic farms.



Synthetic fertilizers were substituted because they cost less than 5% of the price of organic fertilizers. As a result, some of California's 2006 harvest of organic fruits, nuts and vegetables weren't really organic. California Department of Food and Agriculture officials were notified of the problem in June 2004 but didn't order the company to remove its products from the organic market until January 2007. Despite this, state officials kept their findings confidential until nearly a year and a half after products were removed from the market.

No farms lost their organic certification. The nonprofit California Certified Organic Farmers, which certifies about 80

percent of the state's organic acreage, decided not to penalize farms that had used the product, since farmers did not know they were using an unapproved chemical. The state could have pursued harsher penalties against California Liquid Fertilizer, including violation of California's organic product law, which carries fines of up to \$5,000. It also could have referred the case to the attorney general's office for civil action as an unfair business practice.

An Illinois Connection - The state first learned of the problems at California Liquid Fertilizer from a whistle blower. In a June 18, 2004, complaint, the former employee alleged that for five years ammonium sulfate had been used in the company's liquid fertilizer.

A year later, state Department of Food and Agriculture inspectors took the first sample of the fertilizer from an Earthbound Farm partner in Salinas.

Over the next year, further investigations found ammonium sulfate in six more samples at farms and fertilizer dealers around the state. In February 2006, they twice intercepted tank cars of ammonium sulfate in a Salinas railyard. Receipts showed the liquid had been shipped to California Liquid Fertilizer from a plant in Decatur, Ill.

The fertilizer maker was caught red-handed. But the product remained on the market for nearly six more months before state officials took action.

In January 2007, the agriculture department agreed to a settlement that removed products from the

market for "improper labeling," a less ominous sounding violation.

More to Come? - Sadly, it appears that the trouble has continued. In November 2007, the distributor of another organic liquid fertilizer, representing about five percent of the market, pulled its product in the middle of another state investigation. Rumors in the industry point to another major disclosure as soon as this month. Sales of organic products have soared from \$5 billion nationwide a decade ago to \$24 billion today, according to the Organic Trade Association. California accounts for nearly 60 percent of the U.S. harvest of organic produce.