

Organic food industry faces 'powerful opposition,' says IFOAM chief DiMatteo

Can ex-OTA president bridge divisiveness within industry and fight big, anti-organic food lobby?

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Katherine DiMatteo is in strategy mode, looking for chinks in the armor of a huge anti-organic lobby that threatens the growth of the fledgling industry.

Named in June as president of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the worldwide umbrella organization for the organic movement, DiMatteo laid out some of the industry's challenges in a recent interview with online journal *Trust Organic Food*.

"We're trying to change how resources are used and who distributes those resources, and the naysayers against organic are the ones who have all those resources," said DiMatteo, who is also a former president of the Organic Trade Association.

"[The naysayers] are the ones saying 'organic is fine for a small segment but that's all, it won't feed everyone.' It's very difficult for grassroots-run organizations that don't have the financial resources or even the science and, to a certain degree, media, behind them. It's hard when you have to keep proving your point in the face of such powerful opposition," DiMatteo said in the interview.

But a widening chasm within the organic food movement itself also threatens to erode the hard-fought market share the industry has carved out in recent years.

"There is real disagreement and there are two main sides I can see," DiMatteo said. "Those who really believe that organic is the best way to farm and that if every farm converts to organic then there will be more organic products for retailers to sell."

On the other side are more militant organic food advocates looking to use their movement to fight social injustice within, and corporate domination of, the global food supply chain.

"They believe that organic is more than just the farming; it's about social justice, small farms, about the corporate and global structure and changing global food cartels that have ruined the world," DiMatteo said. "They want to keep out [of the organic movement] those who are a corporation, [those who] are mainstream, or who might make conventional products as well as organic. They argue organic should be about eating whole food, not processed, whether it's organic or not."

Not only are the two camps what many refer to as the industry's "circular firing squad," the division has spawned a new group of sustainable food advocates wrapped up in the local food movement, which calls for supporting small, family farms and reducing food miles.

DiMatteo expressed her dismay over the lavish treatment the local food movement has received from influential groups compared to the penny-scraping process of raising funds for the organic food industry.

"A number of foundations and NGOs have given a lot of money to persuade people to buy local or sustainable, and change the way they eat - to the tune of millions and millions of dollars," she said in the interview. "Millions have never been spent on organic, no one ever wanted to fund organic. The funding for organic has come directly from those involved and only from outside when it's related to other issues."

Still, she concedes that the organic food movement must incorporate a more holistic approach to both producing and selling its goods.

She laid out some common values that the organic movement, as one, can rally behind, including: profitable livelihoods for farmers, retailers or processors; equal access to markets; adequate food supplies for people; market and government policies that encourages entrepreneurial farms and individuals; and acknowledging the importance of food cooperatives.

"Organic can partner with all these other values. But the different principles don't have to become part of the same rules," DiMatteo said. "Indeed, I would argue you don't want governments to start legislating on the principles."

So, what's the key to bridging the divide within the movement?

"We allow and encourage discussion to try to encourage the differing sides to reach agreement... to reach a middle ground. When an organization can't take a position on something it's not a good thing, but at the end of the day if members don't like that position, they will leave," DiMatteo said.