**THE GREAT DEBATE**

Most mornings in rural areas, sometimes before the sun peeks out into view, there are pick-up trucks lined up in parking lots of co-ops and diners. Local farmers, hot coffee in hand, starting their day discussing the latest news and controversies of the week. The low price of wheat vs. the high price of everything else, Trump vs. the media, gun rights, taxes, and who’s going to win the ballgame on Friday night. But there is another controversial topic on the horizon that has agricultural roots, no pun intended. It’s been a phrase that’s been around for several years that includes the word ‘farming’, which all of the locals are comfortable and extremely knowledgeable about. However, when you add the word ‘organic’ in front of that farming word, that’s when the tone of the room can change and it’s raising lots of questions. It might be something that some would like to ignore, but with the wide-spread pro-organic statistics in an information-driven society, along with brilliant marketing and labeling, the consumer is someone who simply can’t be ignored.

What I am referring to by organic is the production of products without GMO’s or Genetically Modified Organisms. It is also described by the USDA as “all-encompassing practices that support cycling of on-farm resources promoting ecological balance and conservation”. There are many categories under organic products, but the most prevalent in today’s marketplace is fruits and vegetables. They are the number one selling category accounting for $13 billion dollars in sales! No matter their knowledge base for desiring organic, consumers want to apply the 5W’s and How concept to their food.

First, the ‘who’: who is wanting it? Again, consumers. Since the 1990’s the demand for organic food has grown approximately 20% each year. By 2015, the Gallup Poll stated that 45% of all Americans were seeking out organic food. I recently discussed this issue with Dale Beerwinkle, owner of Ag Strategic Services, who serves as an independent consultant for local growers. He accredits the push to seek data, in both small scale and large scale production, of this highly debatable topic to the significant purge of the public demanding organic foods. Simply, the consumer has money and money talks.

The other ‘who’ of this sector that is having an enormous effect on the acknowledgement of this somewhat controversial topic is the Federal Government. Not only has it demanded the USDA to direct attention to this, but the NOP, the National Organic Program, is a newly developed agency within the USDA that sets national standards for producers to adhere to if they desire the beloved organic label that all of those consumers are anxiously seeking. Within this agency entire farming operations can become certified organic. The number of certified organic farms has tripled since 2002. Our great state of Oklahoma has been certifying organic farmers since 1989 with the creation of the Oklahoma Organic Food Act. This act provides minimum production standards for all food products labeled “Oklahoma Department of Agriculture Certified Organic”.

The ‘what’ of organic foods can have different meanings to different people. To the consumer it means a healthier, smarter choice of food consumption. There are studies that show many positive results that organic foods are nutritionally dense and contain more vitamins and cancer-fighting anti-oxidants. To farmers it can simply mean growing food naturally the way it was intended to be grown. Or they might view it as more labor-intensive, more paperwork, and more government interaction to a job they are already doing effectively. More of the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ mentality.

So ‘when’ did organic production and consumption really begin? Organic farming has obviously been around for centuries, but in the mid 1940's the term "Organic Farming" was coined by Robert Rodale. He studied other pioneers in this field abroad and brought the term to the America. The USDA designed organic certification in 2001. Since then, federal spending has increased, and support for organic production has also increased eight-fold since its creation.

It’s obvious to the ‘where’ organic farming takes places, but not as much to the question of where to purchase organic food. Large markets who pride themselves on this label include Whole Foods, a chain retailer who made organic products trendy and available under one roof. The problem to some consumers was the sticker-shock they encountered when purchasing these items, some up to 5 times the cost of non-organic products offered in other big box stores. However, one of the world’s biggest food retailers Aldi, who prides themselves on low-pricing, is now offering organic foods. It will be interesting to see the future polls on organic consumption with it now being offered at a larger, lower-cost scale.

Why the ever-growing demand for non-GMO consumable products has too many points to reference today, but the main ones are these: organic products are being promoted that they are healthier for consumers and safer for the environment. Healthy plants mean healthy people. Thus, this motivates people to either grow items themselves, purchase them at local or large-scale markets, and push the government for more and stricter labeling requirements for producers. Another poll stated that more than 90% of Americans want stricter labels on GMO products. As for the environment, this system aims to produce food by establishing an ecological balance, which eliminates the need for artificial fertilizers and pesticides, and exclusively uses methods of crop-rotation and compost. There are even organic chemicals that are used and proven effective to increase productivity of products, and still offer safeguards for consumers. And lastly, how do current farming operations, no matter their size, begin to meet the dramatically increasing demand of organic products? That answer is being debated, both on Capitol Hill and in the local co-ops and diners. There will have to be an answer to that soon or other world markets will benefit, more than they already are. No matter the reason the consumers are giving for wanting organic products, the unfortunate fact is that it costs substantial money in order to switch entire productions to an organic style. Between the initial costs, and with the long return time on investments, it’s not an instant sell to producers of any agricultural product.

So no matter the outcome of the next election, or that game on Friday night, both of which will have a definite answer at a specific time, the answers to the all of the questions that arise with the phrase ‘organic farming’ will be ever changing and always debatable. But one thing will remain the same: the pick-ups will be lined up, the coffee will always be hot, and the farmers who grow our nation’s food will continue to produce the very best quality the very best way they can.