



OPSON VIII operation: is this the way to target fraud with organics in the EU?

Since 2011, Interpol and Europol have been undertaking the so-called OPSON operations. Opson is an ancient Greek word for valuable food. The name could not have been chosen more wisely, as the operations target crime within our food supply chains, where fraudsters sell less valuable products for higher prices, making money that they do not deserve.

OPSON VIII reveals crime within the organic sector

The OPSON operations are meanwhile carried out annually, joining efforts of police, customs, national food regulatory bodies and private companies across borders. In 2018, the operation [OPSON VIII](#) has, for the first time, investigated fraud cases in the organic sector, where the organic label is more and more frequently being misused. By making false promises and misleading consumers, criminals are damaging the reputation of the organic brand worldwide. OPSON VIII was run across 16 EU member states and uncovered the use of unauthorized substances, marketing of conventionally produced food to the organic market and the use of falsified documents to blur the traceability of the products. Investigations are still under way but resulted already in a number of administrative and criminal proceedings, sanctioning of operators and the seizing of products. The findings show again that criminals will take advantage of any and every opportunity open to them to make a profit. But will annual, foreseeable operations like OPSON VIII be enough to deter them from undermining organic integrity on the long run?

The EU organic control system is outdated

Without a doubt, the operation – although urgently needed – only skimmed the tip of the iceberg. Scandals and sanctions make great headlines, but the organic market is simply too attractive for fraudsters to be put off that easily. One scandal with mislabeled products follows the next one, and consumers lose trust in seals and labels which promote sustainable production practices. Yet, our organic control systems lack effective prevention mechanisms. This was recently confirmed again by the EU court of auditors in their [Special Report No 4/2019](#). Instead of turning the screws on the existing structure, instead of relying on paper-based certificates and instead of only re-acting to the problems we already have, we need to re-think our system and bring it forwards into today's modern world. The organic brand carries a promise which needs protection and prevention measures before fraud actually hits the headlines.

TRACES does not go far enough

One step in the right direction is the introduction of [TRACES](#), the European Commission's multilingual data tool that aims at digitizing certification information for establishing oversight over organic imports to the EU. Exporters, importers and certifiers are working together to provide data for the electronic import certificate. However, the tool does not go far enough, as it obliges neither the certification bodies nor the producers to provide information on the certified acreage on which organic products have actually been grown and their yields. Without that information at hand, nobody can



compare what enters the organic supply chain with what is being sold as labelled organic. Hence, it is impossible to get an idea of the extent of fraud that is already happening – and to fight it effectively. The only realistic solution to tackle food fraud – not only within the organic sector – is a mass balance that calculates whether or not the sold amounts of a product that carries a product claim (be it organic, fair-trade or otherwise) match the corresponding certified production capacities.

A mass balance approach with real-time certification and transaction data is needed

The cloud-based online platform [Check Organic](#) can easily calculate the mass balance for commodities. Check Organic is a real-time source of global certification and product transaction data. Utilizing the information uploaded by participating companies, the platform maps the flow of goods and monitors the volumes of organic produce traded along the supply chain, checking the plausibility of produced vs. sold organic quantities. Whilst the products travel along the supply chain, Check Organic displays the operators' certification status and the products' integrity status via an intuitive traffic light system. This enables processors and traders to significantly mitigate fraud risks and ensures them that they are really selling what their labels promise. Time- and money-intensive retrospective backtracking of supplies is no longer required, and audit and inspection procedures are substantially eased. In order to accelerate and facilitate the process of globalization of the system, talks with the NOP of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the European Commission, and other governments are under way. But as long as none of these authorities oblige the certification bodies to provide information on acreage and hence of the production capacity for organically certified products, this level of transparency will only be shown by companies that already care about integrity, that care about the reputation of the organic brand. In the meantime, fraudsters will exploit every loophole they can find to continue their criminal activities and damage the reputation of the organic sector. Operations like OPSON VIII may unveil some of them, trigger some more scandalous headlines that will make consumers even more suspicious about the real value of organic products. In an attractive market like the organic one, a high level of transparency has to become mandatory.

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