

April 2009

# NomineeAlert



## this issue:

Kathleen Merrigan, Nominee for  
Deputy Secretary of Agriculture

## Merrigan's Background

Director of Agriculture, Food and  
Environment Program, Friedman  
School of Nutrition Science and  
Policy

Assistant Professor,  
Tufts University

Director, Center on Agriculture,  
Food and the Environment

Adjunct Professor, Tisch College of  
Citizenship and Public Service

Federal Agency Administrator, U.S.  
Department of Agriculture, Agricul-  
tural Marketing Service

Expert Consultant, Food and  
Agriculture Organization of the  
United Nations

Senior Analyst, Henry A. Wallace  
Institute for Alternative Agriculture

Professional Staff, U.S. Senate  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition  
and Forestry

Special Assistant, Texas  
Department of Agriculture

Staff for Massachusetts State  
Senator John Olver (D)

## EDUCATION

B.A. Williams College

M.A. University of Texas at Austin

Ph.D. Massachusetts Institute of  
Technology

## Who is Kathleen Merrigan? Now eat your vegetables...

On March 19 President Obama nominated Kathleen Merrigan to be Deputy Secretary of Agriculture.

Although she's a huge proponent of organic farming, Merrigan admits that organic food has not been shown to be better than conventionally grown food. "While many of us believe there are

nutritional benefits to organic food, this has yet to be scientifically documented."

Merrigan also wants more money to study organic farming. Specifically, she wants more government research to determine whether organic farming methods are any better than regular methods.

"We just don't know," said Merrigan, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. "With both organic food sales and organic acreage increasing, research has to

keep pace. Currently, there's little published research that shows how the safety of organic foods compares to the safety of conventional foods."

**“ While many of us believe there are nutritional benefits to organic food, this has yet to be scientifically documented.**

**We just don't know. ”**

Although she does not know whether organic food is any better, she wants more federal money to subsidize organic farmers and complicated regulations and a powerful

bureaucracy to guide and help these farmers.

This blind faith in the government is hard to understand considering the scandal that rocked the USDA while she was there. In July of 2000, she testified before Congress about wide-ranging corruption at the USDA's Hunts Point Marketing Terminal. Producers were being cheated by buyers and bribed government inspectors. This corruption continued for years and farmers likely lost millions of dollars in revenues. Farmers were hesitant to complain about the corruption for fear that their treatment by inspectors would grow worse.

## Sources for further reading:

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*Grapes, Wine & Biotechnology, Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges*, Summary of Multi-Stakeholder Workshop, Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, July 2006. Available online at: [http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/www.pewtrusts.org/Reports/Food\\_and\\_Biotechnology/PIFB\\_Winegrapes.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/www.pewtrusts.org/Reports/Food_and_Biotechnology/PIFB_Winegrapes.pdf). (Accessed April 2, 2009.)

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*Friedman Policy Points*, April 2004, Tufts University. Available online at: <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/docs/PolicyPoints/2004-04.html>. (Accessed April 2, 2009.)

Natural Foods Network Magazine, September/October 2007. Available online at: [http://solis.365media.com/nfnportal/includes/nfn15\\_naturalfoodnetworkmagazine.pdf](http://solis.365media.com/nfnportal/includes/nfn15_naturalfoodnetworkmagazine.pdf). (Accessed April 2, 2009.)

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# More information you really need to know about Kathleen Merrigan.

- Merrigan wants a set aside program that would require the government to buy organic foods. “The government is a very big business for the food sector. Food purchased for the military, the National School Lunch Program, the USDA cafeteria, elderly feeding programs, etc., could be organic as a matter of government policy. We already have built-in preferences or set-asides for small and minority-owned businesses. Why not do the same for organic?”
- Merrigan supports the government provision of organic crop insurance. “USDA has begun looking at this [organic crop insurance], but organic farmers need it now. . . . Organic crop premiums must be accounted for in insurance programmes, as well as crop loss from genetic drift (GMO contamination).” In 2006, “Merrigan said government could also better address problems when they occur. Government could compensate farmers, change liability laws, develop applicable crop insurance programs, develop a trust fund, and implement penalties (e.g., fines or probationary periods) for people who cause peaceful coexistence problems.”
- Merrigan admits that the use of manure in organic farming is troublesome. “Critics of organic agriculture cite the use of manure in organic systems as troublesome, which is true. . . . We have not answered the scientific questions surrounding the safe use of manure.”
- Merrigan dislikes the fact that the customer is always right.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest and Public Voice are two prominent consumer groups who helped get the [organic] legislation passed. The tens of thousands of letters denouncing USDA’s first proposed rule were mostly from consumers. They are the power behind organic farmers. That’s the good news. **The bad news is that customer is “always right”**. The outright ban on GMOs may have some negative implications for organic farmers and handlers, limiting their access to some critical materials such as animal vaccines.

- Merrigan drafted the legislation which created the National Organic Standards Board, which includes representatives of environmental and public advocacy groups and gives them immense power. “The Center for Science in the Public Interest and Public voice are two prominent consumer groups who helped get the legislation passed. . . . The very voting structure of the NOSB gives environmental and consumer groups a veto-life power over the organic industry.”
- Merrigan wants organic regulations to be broad—empowering bureaucrats. “Too many so-called organic standards are in fact statements of principles, rather than measurable, enforceable practices. This is not the case with the NOP [National Organics Program]. In fact, the opposite is most likely true in that there is too much detail. . . . I have always envisioned an important role for certifying agents in developing farms and handling plans with their clients.” Of course, this flexibility that she suggests also swings the door wide open to corruption.
- Merrigan wants the government to get involved in making sure that organic companies get access to shelf space. “If the government sees value in organic goods, perhaps it could develop an assistance programme to help organic companies defray slotting fee costs when they first begin. Maybe USDA could, in exchange for various USDA services, require a certain percentage of supermarket shelves be provided for new goods. Perhaps antitrust authorities could be exploited to find ways for the government to disallow prohibitively expensive fees that result in market concentration by large firms.”

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