

serve no useful purpose to create standards for foods which are virtually the same . . . ”

And that bring us to U.S. Senate Bill S.2108, an organic food act co-sponsored by 21 senators and championed by Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Kathleen Merrigan, who works on the Senate Agriculture Committee under Leahy, spoke at the organic conference, telling the group that if S.2108 is passed this year, “by as early as September, this nation will finally take its first step toward a rational and meaningful organic foods program.”

S.2108 is far from final form, but its principles would require the government to keep consumers informed about the content and processes going into their food. Organic foods would require special labeling, inspections, and certification at the state level.

It also would establish a “model” organic farm in every agricultural county in the nation, a “learning place,” where organic food skills would be nurtured and shared among farmers themselves.

The Leahy bill places most of the regulatory responsibility for organic food at the state level, with intense congressional oversight of the federal government’s role. The reason, said Merrigan, who works on the Senate Agriculture Committee under Leahy, “is Agriculture [Department] is so screwed up, having them oversee organic food would be like the cat guarding the cream.”

Merrigan also ignited the most passionate moment at the conference when she cautioned the activist-filled room not to “panic for organic.”

“Don’t look for miracles from government on this,” she declared. “Organic food represents a system of agriculture that can’t be captured in a graph or two — or even in this 120-page bill. It won’t solve the problems of the Western World.

“It’s a process,” she reminded her audience, “and a difficult one. You’ve got to be flexible, understanding that what works on one farm may be inappropriate one county away.

“We have to learn to speak the same language on this,” she said, “something that must be built up slowly over time, one layer of trust after another.”

Then there was the meat flap in 1988, when the Reagan administration stirred up trade war talk after the EEC forbade importation of certain U.S. meats, claiming they were so riddled with chemical additives, drugs, hormones and chemicals, they were unfit for human consumption.

Ultimately, the administration forced Europe to back down, and millions of pounds of meat were shipped — only to be processed as pet food or shipped to third-party nations. The EEC simply refused to put its citizens at risk with American food.

And while Washington dawdles, more than 1,000 of the nation’s 17,000 supermarkets test foods for pesticide residues, using private companies that work with the stores’ contract growers. Grocery chains, such as Safeway, sell organic produce, and more supermarkets are selling locally grown produce, which is less likely to require pesticides after harvest because of shorter transit periods.

However, last year when the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture — an umbrella group of agriculture commissioners from the various states — called for a national organic food program, it got curious responses from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration.

The USDA wrote back, saying it was “looking into the issue of ‘organic’ claims on the labels of meat and poultry products. The FDA’s response to the agriculture commissioners was that “the term ‘organic’ or ‘organically grown’ food [is] inherently misleading in application to food, per se . . . There is no scientific credence in the notion that ‘organically’ produced food is any better or any worse than food produced differently. Thus, we believe it would