

**Organic in the city!**  
 Organic Federation of Canada  
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September 24<sup>th</sup> 2012

## ORGANIC MONDAY

### The Organic Federation of Canada celebrates the Organic Week!

The Directors of the Organic Federation of Canada invite you to celebrate the Organic Week!

As per last year, we prepared many articles about various aspects of the organic production.

We invite you to visit the website [Organic Week](http://www.organicweek.ca) that describes the activities that organic stakeholders have organized all across Canada to promote their work and vision!

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Do you remember the “Mondays with Michel”? Today, we present an interview with Michel Saumur, the National Manager of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency who helped create and managed the Canada Organic Office.

As he will retire October 31<sup>st</sup>, we present a summary of his work.

**Have a nice week!**

## Meshing organic ideals with a regulatory framework

# Michel Saumur retires on October 31st after having helped create and managed the Canada Organic Office

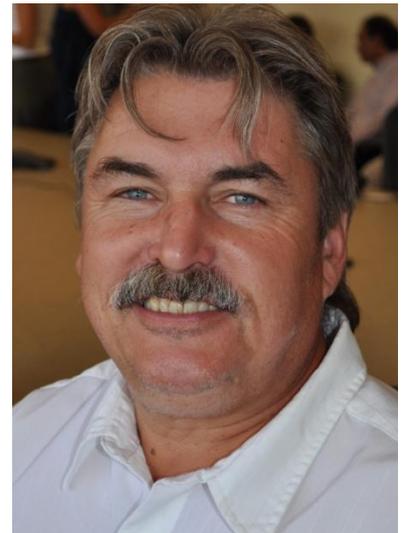
by Nicole Boudreau

As recently as early 2000, Canada did not have regulations to supervise Canadian organic production. Organic designation was awarded without any monitoring. Although some products intended for export were certified organic (most often in compliance with the standard of the importing country), other than in Quebec, organic claim was generally made in a haphazard manner. It could be sincere, but often deceptive.

In 2003, Michel Saumur, agronomist and project manager at Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) since 1983, was given the task of assessing the organic sector's regulatory needs. The primary issue was to find out whether the Canadian government needed to implement regulations to supervise the production and sale of organic products.

"We needed to identify the problem and to design a possible regulatory framework," comments Saumur. "Canadian consumers who were buying "organic" products did not have any guarantee that the product was complying with their expectations. At the CFIA level, the mandate is to protect consumers. In addition, the organic sector's activists were asking Agriculture and Agri-food Canada (AAFC) to help define the Canadian organic standard."

This led to a round of national consultations. Saumur visited several cities to hear what organic food producers' were calling for, which in turn convinced CFIA to go ahead with planning a formal certification process. In 2004, Joe Southall, a CFIA manager, began to create a management structure that would supervise compliance and monitor organic production in Canada. One year later, Saumur succeeded him to become the national manager of the Canada Organic Office (COO), where he undertook structuring the COO.



"We had to open doors and gain acceptance," says Saumur. "We knew that regulation would be implemented to supervise organic production and trade in Canada, because the European Union had decided at that time that products from countries without organic regulations would not be imported into its territory. So we had to move ahead to protect Canadian export, but it was the first time in 25 years that a new regulation was introduced in CFIA, and we were confronted with some rigidity within the agency. But we were supported by our president Joe Fadden."

Saumur had to make sure that he implemented rules that would satisfy enthusiastic organic stakeholders. As he found out, however, it is difficult to meet everybody's expectations. "There were already structures in place in Quebec and British-Columbia, plus the Standard Council of Canada, which was accrediting certification bodies," Saumur explains. "We decided to keep those structures and to turn them into Conformity Verification Bodies (CVBs) that would be affiliated to the COO, and would accredit Certification Bodies (CBs). This arrangement didn't please everyone, but we were maintaining competent structures that were already performing, so that the COO could invest more energy in national management instead of in auditing CBs."

Furthermore, the revision of the Canadian Organic Standards (COS), funded through AAFC programs, was already in progress; the COS, which was a voluntary standard, would be referenced by the Organic Product Regulations (OPR). “It was already clear that, as per the will of the stakeholders, the standard would not be inserted in the OPR in order to keep it under the control of the industry. That was a unanimous opinion within the sector,” adds Saumur.

Saumur emphasized that fitting organic production into a regulatory framework was a delicate exercise.

**“I reminded the organic stakeholders to stay alert; once the Organic Products Regulations would be enforced, they would have to operate under this frame. A regulation cannot be vague, it has to be well-defined. It is written black on white, no more grey zones.”**

The first OPR was published in 2006 but not enforced. The sector would get a two-year transition period to adapt to new production and trade rules. During those two transition years, Saumur frequently teleconferenced with organic stakeholders, and “Mondays with Michel” became part of the sector’s regular routine. It was at this time that the Organic Federation of Canada was created to become the sector’s representative to the COO. “We could not discuss with each individual. We required a representative who could consult with the sector, and circulate information relating to the OPR,” explains Saumur. OFC was officially launched on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

The organic logo was created; the Stream of Commerce Policy was set to avoid disrupting trade and gradually implement the regulations, which were officially enforced in June 2009; and the equivalency agreements with United States and the European Union were negotiated. This was all done while consistently consulting with the organic sector.

“There are projects that I could not implement, such as creating an advisory committee who would meet annually to assess the impact of policies on the organic sector,” Saumur reflects. “I would also have liked importers to be licensed, as global organic production is so diversified.” Nonetheless, Saumur is very satisfied with the committees that work with the COO and help harmonize the way that rules are applied. “The Standards Interpretation Committee, the CVB Committee and the CB Committee guarantee the ongoing cooperation between stakeholders and the COO. These committees are very efficient; it is a partnership that supports the COO. The work load of these committees is substantial, but this load will diminish as practices become more harmonized.”

Michel Saumur will retire on October 31<sup>st</sup>, and leaves an efficient COO. “The system is in place, administrative procedures are clearer. It is necessary to remain flexible to adapt to changes and develop communication. It is the key to harmonizing the system and reducing frictions,” comments Saumur, whose retirement will not be idle. The sheep farm he bought in 1986 and his real estate projects keep him busy every day. He also has some ideas for new business projects and even plans to become a consultant for the organic sector.

The organic sector certainly hopes that CFIA will nominate a successor as affable and consistent as Saumur. He succeeded in representing to the CFIA a sector that was often perceived as being marginal, but whose agricultural practices are now recognized at national and international levels.