By: Joe Schuler, Staff Member

Under a regulation finalized in late 2010 and set to take effect in 2013, brewers who label beer as organic must use organic hops. [1] The requirement is a result of an amendment adopted by the USDA. [2] The National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances details substances that may be used in products marketed as organic. [3] The National Organic Standards Board recommends changes to the list, with the USDA giving final approval. [4] Currently, inorganic hops may be used because it consists of less than five percent of the product, but that will no longer be the case once the regulation takes effect in 2013.
This is a welcome change for growers of organic hops. Many lobbied for the change because they had difficulty selling their product. Brewer were more likely to use the inorganic variety simply because it tends to be cheaper to produce. Of course, the new regulation should mean increased demand for the organic variety.

According to the American Organic Hop Growers Association, there are approximately 100 acres of organic hops currently grown in the U.S., with a capacity to double in one year. It seems likely that this will become a reality. In fact, it seems that organic farmers will see a complete reversal of fortunes – going from struggling to find a market to struggling to meet demand. This in part stems from the fact that it usually takes two years to produce a full hops crop, and because of uncertainty about the varieties of organic hops that brewers will desire.

It is however a clear win for organic growers. For consumers, it may be a mixed bag. Organic beer prices may rise, at least in the short term. However, for consumers who choose to buy beer labeled as organic, they will now get a product that better fits that label. It is hard to see that as anything other than a win.

[2] Id.
[4] Id.