

## Suggestions

by Norman Weiss, Weavers Way  
Purchasing Manager

GREETINGS AND thanks for writing. As usual, suggestions and responses may have been edited for brevity, clarity, and or comedy.

I was going to continue my fascinating lectures on our unhealthy food system and the role of a co-op in it, but seems that something more pressing has come up, or at least more current, which is the brouhaha about Eden Foods. I received a number of emails about it, and I think it's an interesting subject that raises a number of issues for co-ops.

If you haven't heard, the issue is that Eden Foods, led by CEO Michael Potter, is suing the Obama administration for exemption from the mandate to cover contraception for its employees under the Affordable Care Act. The suit alleges that forcing the company to cover contraception would violate its rights under the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Administrative Procedure Act.

As soon as this hit the news, Weavers Way began to get a few emails per day from members who wanted to make sure we had heard about this and also some members calling for a boycott and / or alternatives. Co-op staff discussed how to respond; here was my initial response to how we handle this concern:

I think we explain it's a complicated issue and encourage people to investigate on their own and make their own choice to buy Eden products, not buy them, contact Eden directly to express their concerns, propose a boycott at WW via bylaws, etc.

It's complicated because:

1. We do not vet the politics of ownership of every company we deal with.



However, that is not to say we shouldn't take action when we encounter information that affects our values (to the extent we've identified them).

2. Eden's main competitors — Silk and Westsoy are owned by Dean Foods and Hain Celestial, whose investors are the likes of Carl Icahn, Vanguard Group, TIAA-CREF and other large institutional investors. Dean Foods and Hain are publicly traded and their ownership can change in a short time, so it is difficult to track accountability of their owners as it relates to co-op values.

3. Eden has set high standards for organic food. They are one of the few organic companies that appears to uphold organic values in the highest sense — they refuse to display the USDA Organic seal on their products because they have higher standards (Eden lobbied to not have USDA Organic standards watered down in 2005 but lost to “big organic” companies).

Eden was also one of first to recognize the hazard of using bisphenol-A in can liners and found alternatives. Eden still deals with smaller scale farmers to source their ingredients. In many ways Eden represents the motivation of the origins of the organic movement for healthy food grown on

healthy soil by people that are treated fairly (albeit, apparently not when it comes to reproductive rights).

Eden management, unlike many of their early and successful natural food peers, never “cashed out” by selling the company to a larger corporation as did White Wave, Westbrae, Knudsen, Arrowhead Mills, Muir Glen, Cascadian Farms, Stonyfield, etc. These companies lost some of the power to keep high natural food standards at the expense of increasing market share and higher corporate profits after they were acquired by large food companies such as General Mills, Kraft, and Cargill.

4. Some rights, like reproductive rights, are controversial and people disagree about what is appropriate (and / or “moral”) and what is not. What is Weavers Way Co-op's role in issues like this? Should the Co-op have an official “stand” on reproductive rights? If so, how should we decide? Vote of membership? Vote of Board (representing membership)? Staff “sense” of membership? Is it not our business at all? Should we assume that because we are in liberal, progressive Northwest Philadelphia that the majority of members disagree with Eden's lawsuit?

So you see, it really is complicated.

Incidentally, if you do want alternatives to Eden, there is not a lot of choice in aseptic 32-ounce soy milks other than Westsoy and SoyDream. However, we do have a good alternative for Eden beans. A small, local, family-owned company, Jyoti (in Berwyn) has come out with a line of organic beans in aseptic pouches, and they are actually cheaper than Eden, plus the beans hold their shape better. (However, Jyoti's aseptic packaging may not be as recyclable as the Eden cans).

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