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Organic Produce: Consumer Perceptions and Practices

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Organic Produce: Consumer Perceptions and Practices

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Background

Organic food is the fastest growing sector of the U.S. food market. It is a common belief that organic food is healthier and more environmentally friendly when compared to food grown and processed conventionally. Despite presumed benefits, our objective was to answer the following questions:

- Why do consumers choose organic, especially when faced with a higher average price?
- Is there scientific evidence that organic foods are healthier than their conventional counterparts?

This project built on a previously conducted demographic and shopping habits survey by our partner agency, City Market, of Burlington, VT.

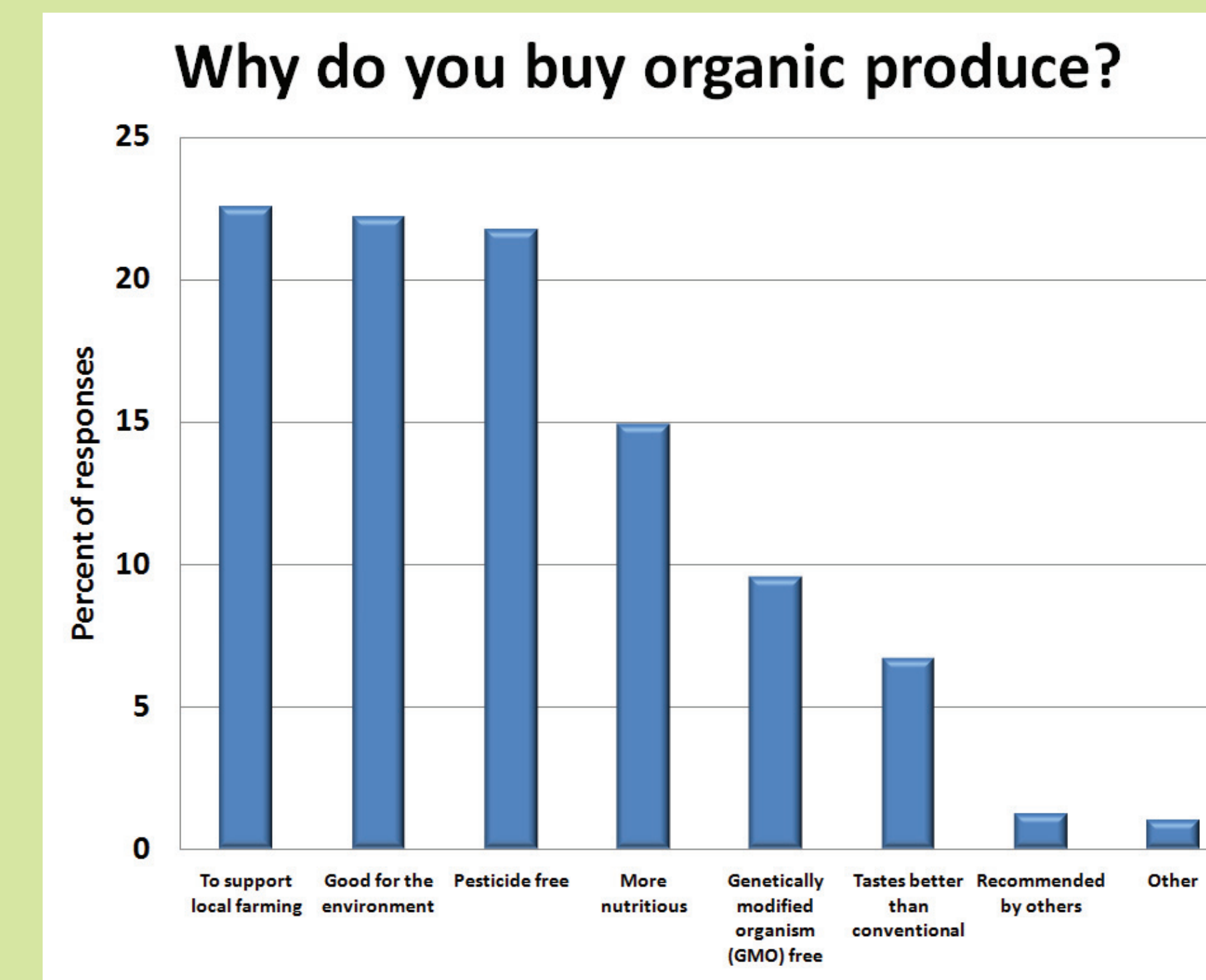
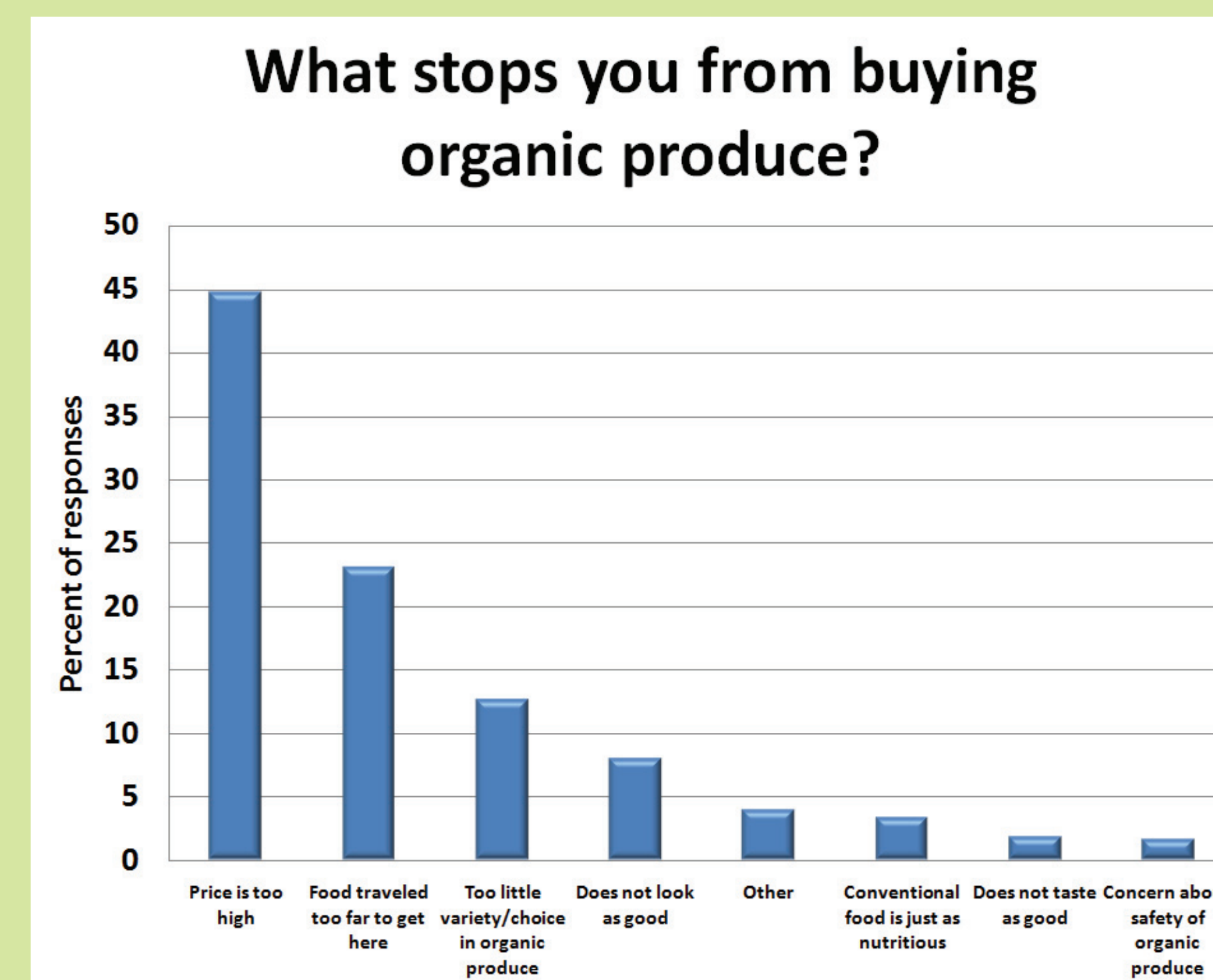
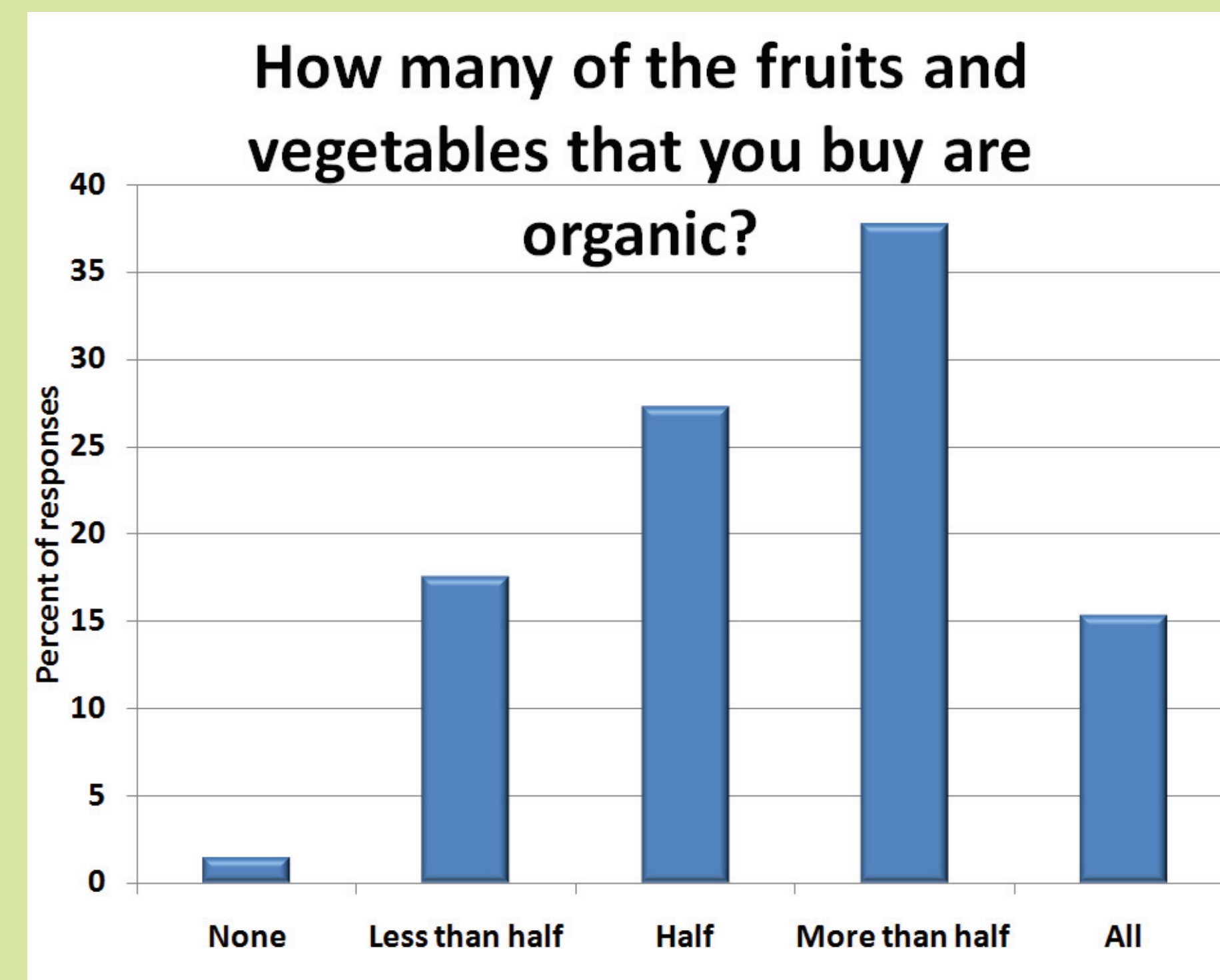
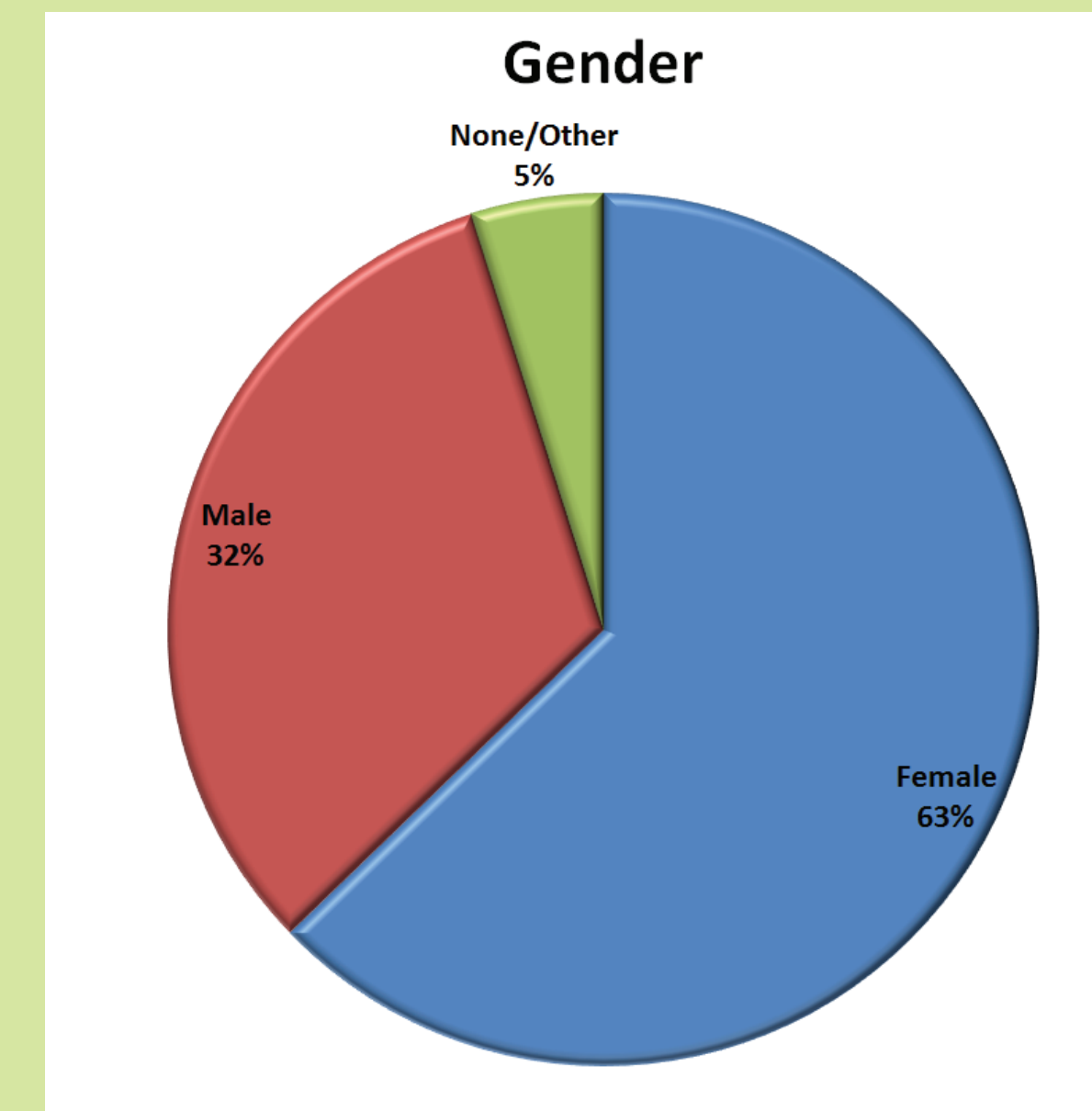
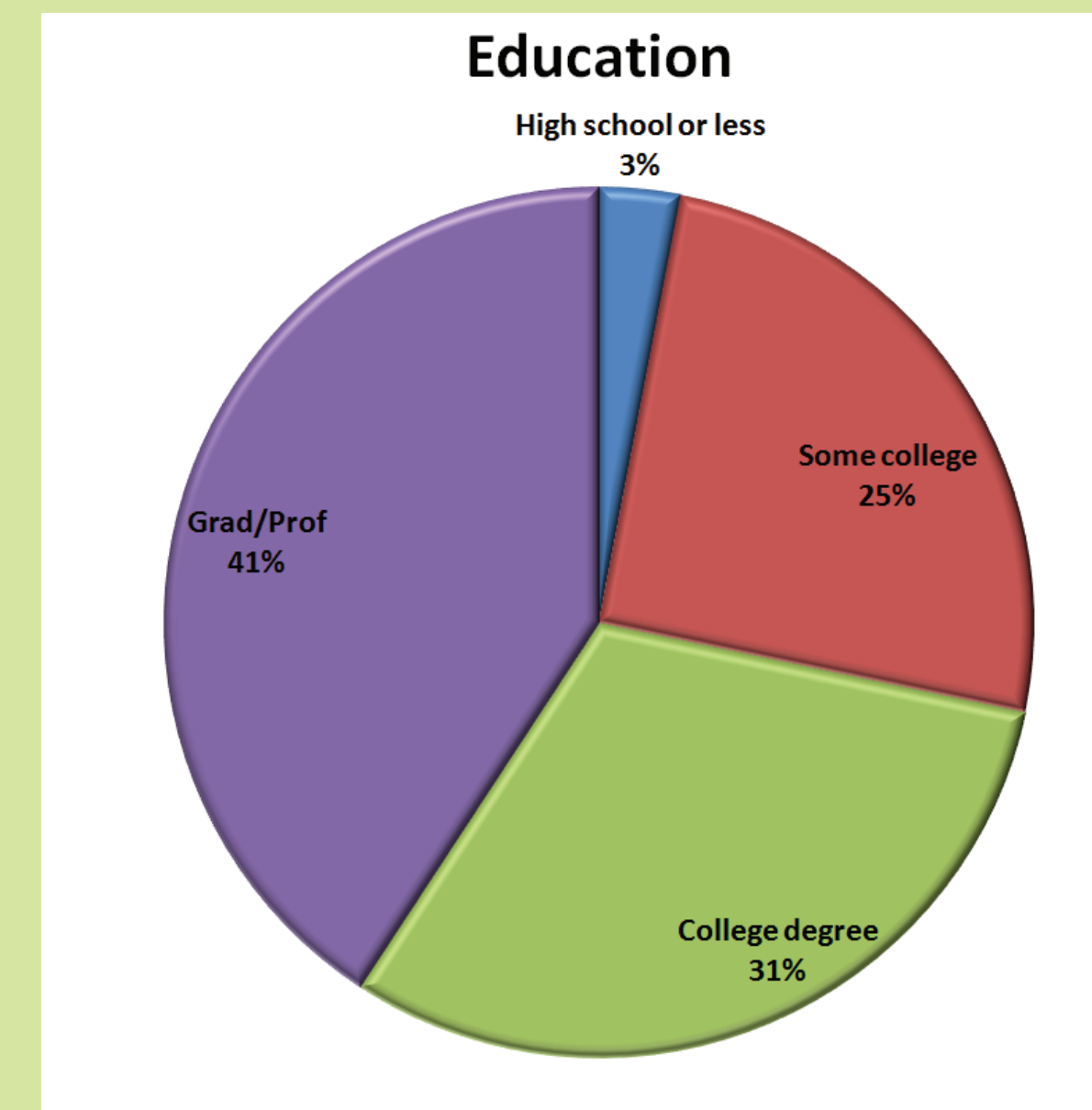
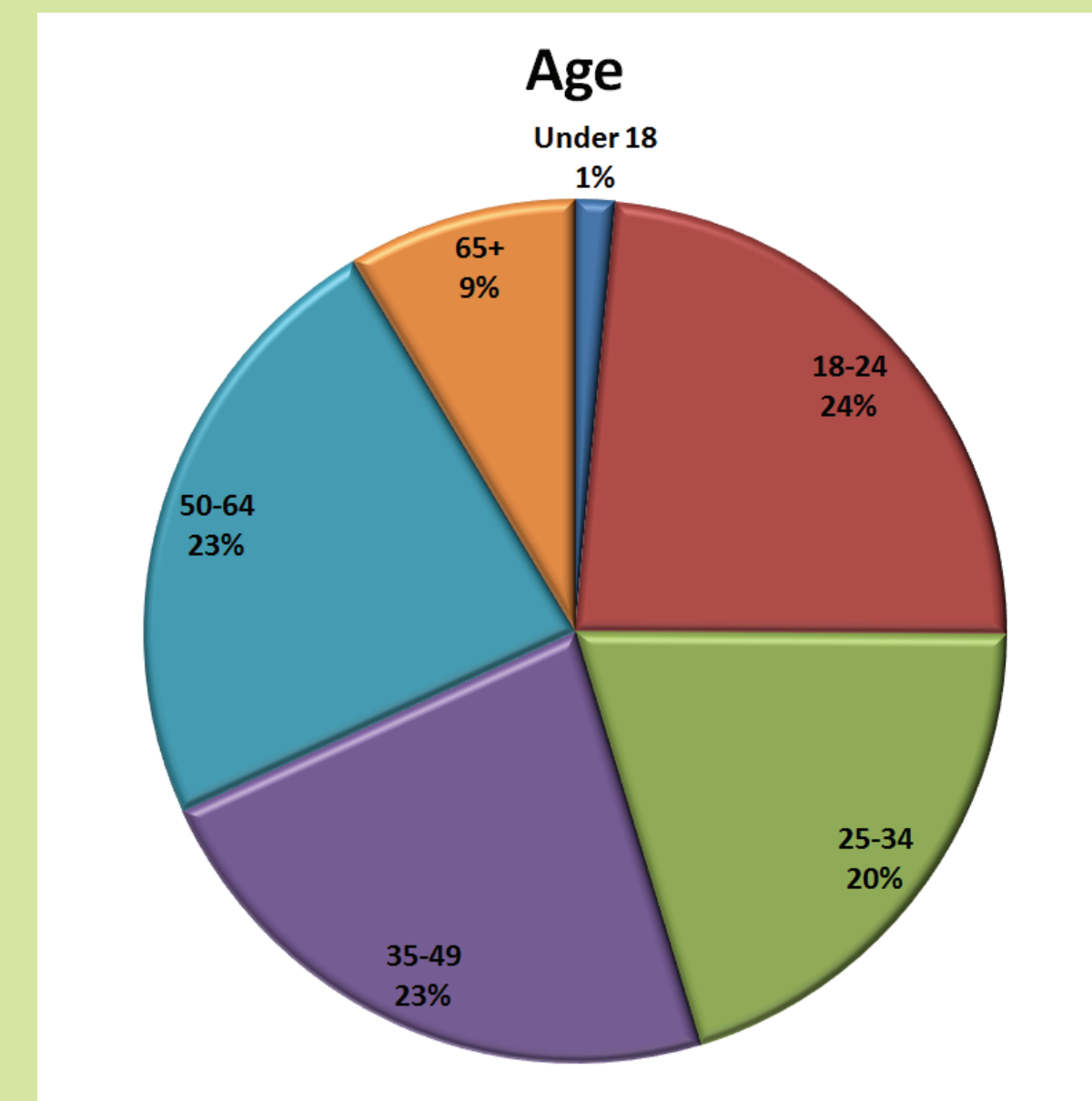
Methods

• An 18 question survey (n = 268) was conducted at City Market by two UVM College of Medicine students at a table adjacent to the produce section. Participants were entered into a raffle for a \$100 gift certificate to City Market.

• Based on survey results, an educational article was written for the City Market member newsletter and informational pamphlets are being distributed in the store.



Results



Conclusions

Although survey results indicate that consumers were knowledgeable of organic food and farming practices, several discrepancies between consumer knowledge and regulations/published data were revealed:

- Many participants were unaware of USDA guidelines for the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers for organic produce.
- Despite inconclusive scientific evidence, participants believed organic produce was safer and more nutritious.

Future Directions

City Market looks forward to continuing their newly formed partnership with the UVM College of Medicine. Avenues for future pursuit include:

- Develop cost effective shopping strategies for the consumer to help “shop organic on a budget”
- Research health benefits of organic in specific populations, such as pregnant women
- Expand upon top survey reasons for choosing organic for further consumer education
- Address other health issues in food production, such as genetically modified organisms and irradiation

References

Dimitri, C., Greene, C. Recent Growth Patterns in the US Organic Foods Market. In A. Wellson (Ed.), *Organic Agriculture in the U.S.* Nova Publishers, 2007.

“Organic Food Standards and Labels: The Facts.” *National Organic Program*, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA. <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/brochure.html>

“Knowledge” Questions and Participant Responses

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Research Shows
Organic produce is grown without synthetic pesticides.	95.5	1.5	3.0	Some are allowed if their use meets certain standards.
Organic produce is grown without synthetic fertilizers.	90.9	3.0	6.0	Some are allowed if their use meets certain standards.
Organic produce is grown without natural pesticides.	14.6	64.4	21.1	Natural pesticides are allowed.
Organic produce is grown without natural fertilizers.	8.2	74.5	17.3	Natural fertilizers are allowed.
Organic produce does not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs).	78.5	7.5	14.0	GMOs are not permitted.
Organic produce is not processed by radiation.	68.5	3.5	28.1	Irradiation is not permitted.
Organic produce is safer than conventional.	79.5	5.7	14.8	Research is ongoing.
Organic produce is more nutritious than conventional.	62.0	14.8	23.2	Research is ongoing.
Organic standards are the same for all types of produce.	10.2	64.8	25.0	Standards relate to land use, not the produce grown.
Organic standards are the same at every store.	23.7	48.9	27.5	Organic standards are the same at every store.
There are laws that regulate what produce can be labeled “organic.”	82.3	5.7	12.1	Federal law governs USDA organic standards.