LOS ANGELES -- Organic grower Phil McGrath plays by the rules to keep his Ventura County strawberry and vegetable farm certified organic.

So suspicions that at least two fertilizer companies have been peddling synthetic fertilizer as the natural stuff makes him fear they may cheapen the "organic" label he grows under.

"It brings the term and the industry down a couple notches," he said.

The state's major organic certifier, the California Certified Organic Farmers, said it won't penalize farmers or revoke their endorsements because it recognizes none had knowingly used the spiked fertilizer.

But the situation has resulted in a blow to the integrity of the organic market, prompting new industrywide efforts to test and verify fertilizers.

"The oversight of the organic industry from a fertilizer perspective is kind of like the wild West," said Dean Florez, D-Shafter, chairman of the state Senate Committee on Food and Agriculture.

As the organic produce market expands from a cadre of small conscientious growers to a massive industry, some farmers are turning to low-cost and highly potent organic fertilizers to make up for shrinking margins.

That demand has resulted in allegations of products being marketed that are too good to be truly organic. Their use threatens a market based on consumers’ willingness to pay a premium for products seen as better for their health and the environment.

The two products implicated had been popular fertilizers among organic growers, though information on the amount produced is not publicly available, said Michael Jarvis, spokesman for the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

"This is a great example of a gross violation of the rules in which case consumers aren't getting what they expected," said Urvasi Rangan, a senior environmental health scientist with Consumers Union.

The most recent allegations surround Port Organic Products Inc., near Bakersfield, where county environmental health experts found thousands of gallons of aqueous ammonia, an ingredient used in synthetic fertilizers, in 2005 and 2007.
Kern County environmental health director Matthew Constantine said his staff informed the state agriculture department and California Certified Organic Farmers about the finds in September 2007.

The Port Organic factory was the target of a Jan. 22 search by FBI and U.S. Department of Agriculture officials, said U.S. attorney's office spokeswoman Lauren Horwood.

Horwood said she could not discuss allegations contained in the search warrant because of an ongoing USDA investigation that may involve other companies. A phone message left with Port Organic was not returned.

The California Certified Organic Farmers quickly banned the growers it endorses from using Port Organic fertilizers.

Growers earn an organic label from the CCOF or other certifying agents by showing that they manage their farms without synthetic pesticides, fertilizers or other chemicals.

Allegations surrounding Port Organic followed revelations that another manufacturer, the now-defunct California Liquid Fertilizer, sold fertilizer spiked with the synthetic ingredient ammonium sulfate for years before the California Food and Agriculture secured its removal.

Produce giant Natural Selection Foods LLC, which had used the California Liquid Fertilizer product, has developed a new test to evaluate the fertilizers used on the roughly 33,000 acres where its Earthbound Farm organic products are grown and has started making on-site visits to manufacturers, spokeswoman Samantha Cabaluna said.

California Certified Organic Farmers also is stepping up its inspections. The certifiers were compiling a list of makers of some liquid fertilizers with high levels of nitrogen - which are expensive to achieve using organic ingredients - and would require those producers to submit to on-site inspections that have not been previously required.

Judith Redmond, whose Full Belly Farms is outside Sacramento, said she hopes those steps keep synthetic ingredients out of the fertilizer she uses sparingly during seasons when her heirloom tomatoes and other organic vegetables need an extra kick.

She said she's spent up to $2,000 on fertilizer that she's no longer permitted to use. But even worse, she believes she's hurt the soil that she nurtures.

"We were sold a product that wasn't what they said and the CDFA was asleep at the wheel," she said.