

Dear Reader,

I'm confused.

Not because people are asking difficult questions. They have every right to.

Not because people care deeply about childhood cancer. This is a deep concern we all share.

I'm confused because the story being told about Driscoll's, my family, and the farming community feels so disconnected from the reality I have experienced my entire life.

What became Driscoll's today began as my great grandfather and his brother-in-law planting an "exotic" strawberry variety in the Pajaro Valley in 1904. Driscoll's is headquartered in Watsonville. Most of the families who own Driscoll's still live in the area and are relatives of the founders. We work with more than 1,000 family farming companies around the world to grow the berries we sell, including more than 80 independent farmers in Watsonville and Salinas alone. Some have worked with us for two and even three generations. Many of our farmers and our employees started as harvesters.

Together, we are constantly looking for ways to improve how berries grow. We invest heavily in food safety and worker welfare so that families can trust that the berries and the farm workers who make them possible are safe. Every year, we continue expanding our organic berry business by partnering with growers willing to make that transition. In fact, we often have more organic berries than the market can absorb and end up selling some portion under our conventional label. This is an investment in expanding the organic category. Our commitment to organic agriculture goes back decades, when my dad started tinkering with organic berry production right here in Watsonville.

We are also responsible for innovation with genetics and production practices that enable us to grow more berries with less resources, including less pesticides. Much of this work is time-consuming, expensive, and impossible for small growers to do.

We work hard to ensure our charitable giving, over \$7,000,000 in Santa Cruz County alone in the last 5 years, reaches the people who need it. That number doesn't include the fruit we donate to the local food banks or the dollars donated personally by owners, employees and farmers. It has been a great privilege to nourish families around the world while creating economic opportunities for local farmers and their collaborators.

Driscoll's company values are Passion, Humility and Trustworthiness and our employees are the best proof of how alive and well these values are. They live in this community, raise their families here. I am amazed and humbled by the commitment and loyalty shown by the people throughout Driscoll's in the face of the current challenges, again, because the public narrative about us is so distant from our experience.

**Here is what I am confused about:**

First, there's a lot of social media activity calling for Driscoll's to change its practices, based on accusations about elevated levels of childhood cancer in Santa Cruz County. What I don't understand is why more people aren't taking the time to look carefully at the publicly available data before drawing conclusions. The Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency website states "No statistically significant excess of cancer incidence was identified" in South County. Yet the childhood cancer rate in the broader Santa Cruz County is well above the state average. Why aren't we all working to understand what's causing this devastating situation? Rigor around the data on a topic this important must matter.

Second, I don't understand the approach of personally attacking owners and leaders of a company. In a world increasingly dominated by institutional capital and faceless ownership, we are still very much present in our business and our community. Yet we find ourselves the target of claims without being given the opportunity to engage in fact-based dialogue.

Finally, I'm confused by how quickly credibility is given to voices without a track record, while the track record we've built over more than a hundred years is discounted. We've tried to operate with integrity over decades, and to engage directly with difficult issues when they arise.

At the same time, we continue to expand organic production, are actively investing in ways to reduce our reliance on traditional pesticides, including developing biological solutions to suppress pests and diseases, and farming in more expensive systems that limit disease pressure. This work is complex, ongoing, and important to us. Many growers could not undertake it on their own. We help lead innovations that benefit everyone.

So, I come back to a few questions.

If the goal is to protect children, farm workers, and local communities, then shouldn't we be aligning around the best available data and directing our attention to where that leads us?

And, is the current approach moving us closer to real solutions, or farther from them?

We are working to extend an open invitation to the community so you can come see what we are up to.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this.



**Brie Reiter Smith**  
Vice Chair

**Driscoll's**  
Only the Finest Berries™