

## Cherry packer: Sustainable Farming Helps Move Crops

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SALEM – Growers who run certified sustainable operations are being rewarded not only with a competitive edge in the marketplace but higher returns as well, according to an Oregon grower/packer/shipper.

“It just becomes an additional bonus to be able to sell something you’re saving money at, at a higher price,” said Ken Bailey, co-owner of Orchard View Farms in The Dalles.

Bailey farms about 1,300 acres, mostly of sweet cherries. He and his brother Bob several years ago began OVF’s integrated pest management program.

“We (weren’t) looking in the short term for a lot of gain in the marketplace. When we first went into it we just felt more comfortable following those procedures.

“We just feel good about farming that way, being responsible for what you’re doing and making sure you can justify using a pesticide or a tillage practice. Don’t just do it because your dad or granddad did.”

Bailey said that he’s been noticing more and more attention paid to certified sustainability by buyers, especially European.

“Over time I hear more of them talking about it. There are very few who are actually requiring it, but the more they talk about it I get a distinct feeling that using sustainable practices piques their interest. And you end up being more of a preferred customer.”

While a certified sustainable operation may not earn crops more in the marketplace at this time, it can set the practitioner apart from those who farm conventionally, Bailey said.

He said that some of his customers have actually brought attention in their

stores to OVF cherries as having been grown using a minimum of chemicals.

Not only is Orchard View Farms’ IPM program gaining them valuable recognition in the marketplace, it’s saving them money on chemicals, Bailey said.

One example of an IPM tactic that has lessened the use of chemicals in cherry orchards is pest monitoring.

“A lot of it is just monitoring your fields and knowing much better when you should be applying things. Whether it’s powdery mildew or leafroller, if you have to use (a pesticide) learn when the best timing is to control the (pest).

“If you put it on at the right time you may only have to do it once if you do enough scouting and learn what stage you’re in.”

Bailey said he and his brother owe a lot to Oregon State University for their farm’s success.

“Both OSU research and extension have played a pretty major role. Many of us have provided plots on our property for them to work with, and so we’re learning at the same time.”

Orchard View Farms was the first in the country to adapt the sealed bags used in marketing salad greens to fresh cherries.

Nitrogen and carbon dioxide injected into the bag slows respiration of the fruit so that it remains fresh longer under cooler temperatures.

“Since we started this process we have not applied any post-harvest fungicides. We’ve used that to preserve higher quality cherries for a longer period of time and put ourselves as a premium brand in many markets around the world.”

Bailey has gone on to license the sealed bag technology to others. “Probably a half to two-thirds of the cherries coming out of Chile in (our

wintertime come in our bags. So there’s economic gains to be made there as well,” he said.

Bailey said that Europe is ahead of the rest of the world when it comes to recognizing certified products.

“It’s becoming a requirement quicker over there. I’ve got one customer who said that this year Europe GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) is going to be required and another one that’s going to make it a requirement within a couple of years.”

This summer Bailey is planning on becoming Europe GAP-certified and is already certified with the Oregon Food Alliance and USDA/ODA Good Handling Practices (GHP).

As for growing organically, “We’ve done some looking. Our major problem is the horticultural practices involved and the controlling of the diseases and insects. We don’t see an advantage for us to go there. We think we can sell our sustainable product in the marketplace for just as high a price and actually produce a better quality product.”

Bailey said that sustainability means more than stewardship of the soil. It also has to do with preserving the environment, managing water properly and such intangibles as social (worker) concerns involving housing, working conditions and wages.

“There are more aspects to it than (organics).”

Bailey said that while most farmers are using sustainable practices there’s a huge difference between that and being certified sustainable. For this to happen, documentation is all-important.

“If you’re not recording it, you’re not certifiable.”