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Food Alliance Certification
Promoting sustainable practices, providing quality food

By Thekla Fagerlie-Madsen

Today's food consumers are looking for quality, freshness, and food products they can trust. Increasingly, their food buying decisions reflect their environmental and social values. The abundance of eco-labels in the marketplace such as "Certified Organic" and "Free Range" help consumers identify products that meet a variety of criteria, from the use of pesticides to how farm animals are raised. But how producers address social questions such as, "Are farm employees fairly treated? Is wildlife habitat protected?" is also of growing concern to consumers, and the answers are not readily apparent in current labeling standards. A large consumer segment, representing approximately 62 percent of the consumer population, is looking for products that represent their values, according to recent consumer research conducted by The Hartman Group. These consumers are emotionally connected with the products they purchase and are interested in purchasing socially and environmentally responsible products. Jean Andreasen, Midwest marketing coordinator for Food Alliance, fits this consumer profile. "As a shopper, I have a list of criteria that I use in making my purchasing decisions. The USDA organic certification doesn't cover all the agricultural issues I'd like to see addressed in food production systems."

Food Alliance's recognizable green and white product certification seal not only identifies a product's regional origin, it also tells consumers that issues such as soil and water conservation, wildlife habitat preservation, animal welfare, and safe and fair working conditions for farm workers have been addressed as part of its farm inspection and certification process.

Food Alliance is widely recognized as one of the nation's leading certifying organizations for environmentally friendly and socially responsible agricultural products. Its mission is to promote sustainable agriculture by recognizing and rewarding farmers who produce food in environmentally and socially responsible ways, and by educating consumers and others in the food system about the benefits of sustainable agriculture. Food Alliance also provides market development assistance, introducing farmers to new markets and introducing grocery stores, restaurants, and food service companies to sustainably certified foods.

The Food Alliance national office is located in Portland, Oregon, with a Midwest affiliate office in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Food Alliance Certification

While many certification programs include environmental categories such as restricting the use of pesticides on crops, "Food Alliance is unique in that it includes a social aspect to the certification," says Ray Kirsch, midwest certification coordinator, referring to the promotion of safe and fair working conditions on farms. Farm inspections are done by a third party, says Kirsch, avoiding any potential conflict of interest. "First, we certify areas of stewardship common to all farms: soil and water conservation, pesticide reduction, safe and fair working conditions, and wildlife habitat preservation. We call these our Whole Farm standards. Then we look at the crops and/or animals produced on the farm and certify areas of stewardship that pertain specifically to these products."

Food Alliance-certified farmers are also required to submit annual reports, and farms are inspected every three years. Currently, 62 Midwest and 120 Northwest growers have been certified and carry the Food Alliance seal on over 200 agricultural products including fruits, vegetables, wheat, wine, livestock, and dairy.

“Food Alliance seemed to fit with our idea of sustainability and good wholesome food,” says Florence Minar. She and her husband Dave own Cedar Summit Dairy in New Prague, Minnesota.

Their third generation farm has been Food Alliance certified for the past two years. Milk, yogurt, and ice cream products are marketed at their on-site creamery and can be found in several grocery stores and natural food co-ops in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. “The Food Alliance seal tells our customers that we don’t use hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics on our animals. That means so much to a lot of people,” Minar says.

While the farm is also certified organic and its milk production falls under one of the organic categories, the Minars feel that the addition of the Food Alliance seal on their products tells a broader story.

“Consumers also know if we are Food Alliance certified we treat our animals humanely and take care of our employees.”

Karla Chambers of Stahlbush Island Farms in Corvallis, Oregon, agrees. “Food Alliance certification is attractive to us because it looks at the whole farm and entire farming system, not just a segment of the system.” She and her husband Bill grow over 15 vegetable and berry crops packaged and sold as frozen products. “We have seen very good success with our own line of 12 frozen fruits and vegetables under the Food Alliance certification.” Part of their farm includes certified organic acres. “While both certifications (organic and Food Alliance) are good, we like the Food Alliance certification because it’s far more comprehensive.” Their Stahlbush line is distributed nationally and in Canada.

Growing in the Marketplace

“Food Alliance certification gives farmers a promotional umbrella under which they can market their products. It gives them a ‘leg up’ with the retailer,” says Ann Woods, a Food Alliance board member and steering committee member of Food Alliance Midwest.

As cooperative and natural foods consumers look to their local food cooperatives to uphold the integrity of food products and offer better food choices than conventional supermarkets, Food Alliance certified products provide certain assurances. “The Food Alliance seal offers a clear identifier for local, sustainable foods and naturally fits with our product line and our values,” says Jeanne Lakso, marketing and members services manager of Linden Hills Cooperative in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Lakso’s customers like the idea of supporting local farms that employ sustainable agricultural practices and, she adds, “The quality and flavor of the food is exceptional.”

Food Alliance certified products have also entered the corporate and collegiate markets. “We’re not only in a certification and market development role,” says Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, “we also provide strategic consulting to food companies on how to understand sustainable agriculture and make purchasing decisions accounting for those trends.” In the Northwest, nearly 30 corporate and college food service operations will use “as much certified products as we can find for them,” Exo says. They also have 64 retail and 74 restaurant accounts. In the Midwest, 53 retail stores and 11 college campuses carry Food Alliance certified products.

For producers and consumers, the Food Alliance certification seal represents product quality and environmental and social responsibility. For food cooperatives carrying Food Alliance certified products, says Andreasen, “it’s another opportunity to express their values as community-owned businesses and put commitment into action by offering more sustainable choices to consumers.”