



## Certified value

Tuesday, January 11, 2005

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SPOKANE – Increased scrutiny of the nation’s food supply has led an increasing number of Northwest farmers to look toward the Food Alliance to certify their crop and animal production.

Known as a third-party verifier, the Food Alliance is feeding a vision that started in 1992 with a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The nonprofit organization was established in 1997. Today, 140 farms and ranches in the Northwest, representing more than 2.1 million acres, are managed under a program of sustainable guidelines intended to protect the environment, farm workers and animals.

Stahlbush Island Farms, a fruit and vegetable processor in Corvallis, Ore., was the first to certify under the Food Alliance in 1998. Karla Chambers, one of the farm’s owners, said there’s value in the sustainable designation from a third party.

“It’s always more credible with the public than if you say it yourself,” she said.

Scott Exo, executive director of the Portland-based organization, said movement toward certification has developed its own momentum as demand for certified product begins to exceed the land base of those who pioneered the endorsement.

Food service companies like Sysco and Bon Appetit are driving much of the demand. What has happened to the beef industry on a very public stage is happening throughout the food chain, Exo said.

“It came to a head with BSE, but those questions were already being asked. Consumers are becoming more savvy about their food, educating themselves, asking more pointed questions,” he said. “If you don’t have answers, somebody is going to take your business away.”

In Eastern Washington, some grain industry end-users are getting their answers from Columbia Plateau Producers, which is marketing Shepherds Grain. A company started by two wheat farmers, it has since expanded to include nine others. All of them practice direct seeding, and all of them are Food Alliance-certified.

Karl Kupers, a partner in the company, said food buyers have become aware of the meaning behind certification, but the general public’s understanding lags behind.

“There are consumers who are knowledgeable, but it is more the buyers who are attuned to the meaning of Food Alliance certification,” he said.

Increasing that awareness is part of the aim of a fund-raising effort now under way at the Food Alliance. The organization is hoping to raise \$1.7 million to continue to foster “Good Food for a Healthy Future.”

The e-mail appeal for tax-deductible contributions touts growth in Alliance-certified farms and ranches and specifies that it means better working conditions for farm laborers, more humane treatment of animals, improved wildlife habitat, conservation of soil and water and reduced use of toxic pesticides.

It happens those are exactly the sorts of things many of today's university students are concerned about. As a result, food service companies serving college campuses have seen a ready market.

"We started promoting in the retail sector and tiptoed into restaurants a year ago, but food service is the new area for us," Exo said. "We got into it by accident. College students are at an age they're asking questions and learning new stuff. That extends to the food they eat, and food service companies wanted to have some answers."

For farmers, the Food Alliance certification is not only a way to get a return for their stewardship, but it's also an opportunity to think about their operations in a structured way.

"Many farmers value that aspect. In reality, a lot of them are doing it anyway, and it's a matter of pride to say, 'Here's an independent party and I'm proud to say I measure up,'" Exo said.

Doc and Connie Hatfield, members of Oregon Country Beef and owners of Hatfield High Desert Ranch in Brothers, Ore., couldn't agree more.

"It's a great educational tool for ranchers because it helps you get your thoughts down on paper," Connie said. "It isn't threatening. It is helping us grow to be better producers."

Calling the once-every-three-year certification process a sort of health audit of their farm, the Hatfields praised Food Alliance inspectors for their competence.

"They are extremely knowledgeable folks. The inspection is a real learning process as much as anything else," she said.

The Alliance currently operates on a half-million-dollar budget, with about 60 percent coming from grants and 40 percent from other sources, including certification fees. Lately, the organization has entered into the consulting business, advising companies who want to find out how to include sustainable agriculture considerations in their product purchasing decisions.

"We're not just selling our certification, but helping them find a solution to a problem defined by wanting to be more responsive to suppliers and the public," Exo said.

Although the Northwest – especially Oregon where about 65 percent of certified farms are located – remains the group's base, the organization has extended its reach beyond the region. An affiliate office for the Midwest is in St. Paul, Minn.

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