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Norpac develops sustainability program for member growers

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Norpac is going sustainable.

The 240 farms that make up Oregon's largest fruit and vegetable processor have contracted with a third party to certify that their production practices are environmentally and socially responsible.

The certification, according to a company executive, will put **Norpac** on target to meet new food production guidelines advanced by the nation's largest food distributor and add value to the co-op's products.

"This is market-driven," said Rick Jacobson, president and CEO of **Norpac**. "Our growers realize what a tough market this is. We have to find a way to distinguish ourselves."

Pest and disease management, soil and water conservation, human resources and impacts on wildlife are areas of production analyzed in standards created by **Norpac** growers with help from Food Alliance and Oregon State University scientists. Growers meet up to 10 standards in each area to qualify for certification and are recertified every three years.

The standards are similar to those used by Food Alliance.

"They made some modifications to the way we do it," said Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, "but it's consistent with what we do."

Food Alliance is a nonprofit organization with offices in St. Paul, Minn., and Portland, Ore. The organization, which has certified production practices on 220 farms and ranches in 14 states, began auditing production practices on **Norpac** farms earlier this month.

Jacobson said **Norpac**'s standards exceed standards advanced by Sysco Corp., the nation's largest food distributor, and are similar to EurepGAP standards, which were developed by European grocers. Sysco, according to Exo, recently announced it was requiring its frozen and canned fruit and vegetable suppliers conform within three years with sustainable standards it developed.

"(Sysco) has looked at the guidelines created by **Norpac** and Food Alliance and said, 'This is exactly what we are looking for. This puts you ahead of the eight ball,'" Exo said.

Norpac plans to have up to 30 farms certified this year.

Beyond addressing Sysco's standards, the certifications are expected to position **Norpac** favorably among a new wave of customers concerned with where their food is coming from and how it is being produced, Jacobson said.

The program was designed by growers, but, Jacobson said, "It deals with a lot of issues the public is interested



Norpac Foods, which includes Flav-R-Pac and Santiam among its brand names, recently initiated farm audits certifying that its growers practice sustainable agriculture. Pictured is Norpac's production facility in Brooks, Ore. The cooperative is headquartered in Stayton, Ore.

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“This is an important step for **Norpac** to take to continue to meet the expectations of their customers,” Exo said. “They have chosen to be proactive about holding themselves to a higher standard.”

Among certification standards set by Food Alliance are a prohibition on the use of 13 pesticide active ingredients that Exo said are some of the more toxic in terms of human health risk.

Jacobson would not release the standards in **Norpac**’s program, saying they are proprietary.

Jacobson said growers chose Food Alliance to audit the program because they believe a third-party audit would add credibility to the certification. **Norpac** used a \$50,000 state grant to help develop the program.

“It wasn’t easy to develop,” he said. “We spent three years on this thing.”

The co-op plans eventually to create a seal signifying that products meet **Norpac**’s stewardship standards. Products with food from noncertified growers will not qualify for the seal.

Jacobson declined to speculate on when the certification will be complete but said within three years the co-op “will be a long way into the effort.”

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