



## Food Alliance certification on the rise in N.W.

By Angie Hanson

(May 16, PACKER WEB EXCLUSIVE) PORTLAND — As consumers become increasingly concerned about their food's history, Food Alliance certification — which ensures good environmental, social and labor practices — is gaining notoriety among Northwest produce industry members.

Portland-based Food Alliance is a non-profit organization that offers comprehensive third-party certification programs for growers, distributors and processors wanting to achieve sustainability in their operations, said Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, which was founded in 1997.

“We’re at a point in history in this country where consumers are thinking harder on the origins of food,” Exo said. “That’s creating both challenges and opportunities about how to respond to that changing set of preferences for more transparency and how product is grown and how employees are treated.

“The real incentives (with Food Alliance certification) are companies are looking to certification to measure whether people are bonafide in their claims and practices.”

As demand for good practices and clarity throughout the supply chain emboldens, the alliance has responded by adding a certification program for distributors/processors and opening a third office in Davis, Calif., in addition to its second office in St. Paul, Minn., Exo said.

According to 2006 sales estimates, Food Alliance had netted \$300 million since its 1997 inception — with \$100 million generated in 2007 alone — fueled largely by an 18% annual farm certification growth rate that’s only expected to continue accelerating, Exo said.

Today, 153 producers and 11 handlers in Oregon and Washington have earned certification and the right to put the alliance certification seal on their product, representing a significant portion of the total 261 producers and 15 handlers in 15 states, Mexico and Alberta that are currently certified, Exo said.

United Salad Co., a Portland-based distributor, and its fresh-cut division, Duck Delivery Produce Inc., attained Food Alliance certification in 2007, Exo said, and F.C. Bloxom Co., a Seattle-based wholesaler, is in the certification process, said William Bloxom, vice president.

“The sustainable ag message is pretty strong here,” Exo said. “We’ve been here for so long, so people have gotten used to what we do and are finding it to their advantage. The Northwest is a leader in sustainability.”

One factor facilitating Food Alliance’s growth is the strengthening preference from the foodservice sector for its suppliers to have alliance certification, Exo said.

Such foodservice providers as Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo Inc., formerly Sodexho, Philadelphia-based Aramark and Palo Alto, Calif.-based Bon Appetit are pushing for it, heavily motivated by universities and corporate campuses with dining facilities, Exo said.

Portland is home to six private colleges and public universities, as well as five Intel Corp. locations that provide 35,000 meals a day, which typically favor suppliers with alliance certification, Exo said.

Restaurants are becoming more interested in Food Alliance, as well, and also are beginning to use its certification as a factor when selecting vendors, as is the case for Vancouver, Wash.-based Burgerville, which has 39 quick-serve restaurants in Oregon and Washington, Exo said.

“They help get us aligned with people with shared values,” said Jack Graves, chief cultural officer for The Holland Inc., owner of Burgerville. “They’ve done a great job.”

The Washington, D.C.-based National Restaurant Association also has approached Food Alliance, requesting more information, Exo said.

“They’re pretty focused on sourcing and offering food that meets promises of sustainability and are increasingly using our inspection process,” Exo said of the foodservice segment. “We started to see active interest from foodservice about five years ago.”

As a result, wholesalers are starting to identify alliance-certified products in their ordering guides, he said.

Retailers, too, are raising the sustainability bar on products, but grocers still lag behind foodservice, as far as using sustainability as a variable in purchasing decisions, he said.

“There’s movement in that direction,” Exo said of retailers. “They’re starting to join the party, in terms of plastic bags and lighting and such, but not so much with products yet.”

As Food Alliance certification becomes a component both foodservice and retail look to, the Food Alliance label, paired with successful marketing, provides companies branding opportunities that can help distinguish them from their competitors, Exo said.

“Certification combined with a branding and marketing strategy that credibly talks about high social performance as a company, is a powerful combination,” Exo said.

## **FOOD ALLIANCE CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS**

**To achieve Food Alliance certification, farmers and ranchers must meet the following standards:**

- provide safe and fair working conditions;
- reduce pesticide use and toxicity;
- conserve soil and water resources;
- protect wildlife habitat;
- ensure healthy and humane care for livestock;
- no added-hormones or nontherapeutic antibiotics;
- no genetically modified crops or livestock; and

- continuously improve practices.

**Food processors and distributors must meet related standards:**

- use Food Alliance-certified ingredients;
- provide safe and fair working conditions;
- reduce use of toxic and hazardous materials;
- reduce and recycle waste;
- conserve energy and water;
- ensure quality-control and food-handling safety;
- no artificial flavors, colors or preservatives; and
- continuously improve practices, according to Food Alliance's Web site.

— The certification process typically requires between two and six months, depending on what needs to be addressed at individual operations, said Scott Exo, executive director of the Portland, Ore.-based Food Alliance.

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