

## Extension Service News

### **OSU Extension helps expand sustainable food-buying options (03/27/2008)**

ALBANY, Ore. – Major food processors in the Pacific Northwest are providing new sustainable buying options for the public by developing standards to certify that their products are grown with respect for the environment.

The Oregon State University Extension Service has been working with food processors and a major food certifier called the Food Alliance to improve growing practices and create environmental stewardship programs, according to Dan McGrath, OSU Extension Service faculty member in Linn County.

"The food processors are following a middle way between mainstream and organic food production," McGrath said. "Certified organic growers are prohibited from using synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. However, a farming system can be certified organic and not be sustainable. 'Middle-way' certification focuses on sustainability rather than only on non-use of synthetics."

NORPAC, a farmer-owned cooperative of 165 farms and the largest fruit and vegetable processor in the Willamette Valley, has developed a voluntary stewardship program of its own, based on the Food Alliance model. Manuel Silveira, vice president of NORPAC, is pleased with his company's stewardship program.

"We've been able to do something practical that still has teeth," he said.

So far, nearly half of the growers in the cooperative have chosen – through self evaluation and audits every three years – to follow four standards: soil and water conservation, responsible pest management, safe and fair working conditions and wildlife habitat conservation.

"NORPAC began thinking seriously about creating a stewardship program in 2002," Silveira said. "But it wasn't just to keep ahead in the market," he said. "Our growers take pride in farming responsibly, and they want people to know it."

The Food Alliance is a nonprofit organization based in Portland that celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. More than 250 farms and ranches in 19 states and one Canadian province are Food-Alliance certified and allowed to display its green seal on their food products. According to vice president Matthew Buck, the Food Alliance was the first to create a sustainable-agriculture certification and is "the most comprehensive for sustainably produced food in North America."

The beginnings of the Food Alliance came in 1993, when the Kellogg Foundation awarded a \$1-million grant that included Oregon State University, Washington State University and the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

"In putting together the Food Alliance, farmers, buyers, processors, environmental advocates and consumers gathered to talk about best management practices," McGrath said. "We worked with a wide variety of both organic and mainstream farmers. We were in agreement about the need for soil and water conservation, wildlife habitat conservation, humane treatment of animals, safe and fair working conditions and many other aspects of sustainable agriculture," he said.

"The program is based on the belief that good soil husbandry is possible with appropriate management of organic matter and tillage, plus the responsible use of fertilizers and pesticides that are considered safe for people and the environment," McGrath said.

More information:

[Food Alliance](#)

[Oregon State University Extension](#)

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