



Group effort focuses on environment, sustainability

Following wheat model, growers aim to cash in on demand for branded crop

By MITCH LIES

Capital Press – Oct 4, 2009

BANDON, Ore. -- Scott McKenzie's decision to join a cranberry collaborative had its beginnings a decade ago when the cranberry grower started growing disillusioned with the market.

McKenzie at the time was selling his berries under contract and into the commodity market.

This year, McKenzie is selling half his berries to Clearwater Cranberries, a collaborative of two growers, the Oregon Environmental Council and the South Coast Watershed Council. The collaborative is working to enhance and preserve environmentally friendly farm practices on the Southern Oregon Coast and to preserve the area's agricultural heritage.

"It's something that had been running through my head for a while," McKenzie said of the recent decision to differentiate his cranberries from others. "But I hadn't gotten where I wanted to go with it.

"When (the collaborative) came and said, 'Here's an opportunity. Would you like to be involved?' It fit what I wanted to do, so I jumped on it."

McKenzie said there were several benchmarks over the past decade that helped convince him to join Clearwater. One involved a recent sale to Bon Appetit Management Co., which supplies food to colleges and corporations.

The company liked McKenzie's berries and asked for more.

"The Bon Appetit sale confirmed to me there was a demand out there and an appreciation for the quality we grow," McKenzie said.

Then there were the success stories of farmers and ranchers who banded together to brand product as sustainably grown.

McKenzie was particularly inspired by a seminar presentation from Shepherd's Grain, a collaborative of 33 wheat growers who grow sustainable, eco-friendly wheat and then brand it as such.

"It was pretty inspiring," McKenzie said. "They showed a pathway through this, and we're kind of following that."

McKenzie, who recently became Food Alliance-certified, said he hasn't changed the way he farms. McKenzie said he was already using soft pesticides and practicing sustainable crop management practices, such as re-using water for bog flooding.

McKenzie also hasn't changed the berry he produces.

Buoyed by a long growing season and the South coast's unique climate, Northwest cranberries are known for their high sugars and high quality.

Until recently, however, the high-quality berry wasn't drawing premiums, McKenzie said.

Allison Hensey, an executive with Oregon Environmental Council, said the collaborative can't ensure participating growers will receive higher prices for their fruit.

But, she said, already buyers are expressing interest in buying cranberries at top dollar from Clearwater.

As for McKenzie, she said, "He's been a trail-blazer. He was amazing in taking that leap of faith."

Staff writer [Mitch Lies](#) is based in Salem. E-mail: mlies@capitalpress.com.