

## **A Sustainable Ally**

**Food Alliance wants to help growers differentiate and add value to their fruit crops through sustainable agriculture practices and certification.**

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Long before the controversial Draft Standard for Sustainable Agriculture was introduced, and sustainability became a widespread, household term, Portland, OR-based Food Alliance was on a mission to create market incentives for sustainable agricultural practices and educate the industry about the benefits of sustainable agriculture.

“Food Alliance certification is a tool that can empower growers, handlers, and brands to differentiate and add value to their products based on social and environmental performance,” says Scott Exo, Food Alliance executive director. “The tool is a set of comprehensive standards combined with independent, third-party verification. And the market continues to embrace the tool and the products certified. We continue to grow at around 20% a year in terms of certification numbers, and growers report a host of benefits.”

With more than \$100 million in sales of Food Alliance certified products in 2007, the benefits to becoming certified are clear, Exo says, but adds his clients also report positive customer feedback, increased customer loyalty, new markets, and sales increases.

### **A Decade Of Growing Demand**

Started in 1993 as a collaborative project between Oregon State University, Washington State University, and the Washington State Department of Agriculture, Food Alliance was incorporated in 1997 and launched its certification program the next year with one apple grower, who sold to three local grocery stores. Today, with more than 300 Food Alliance certified farms and ranches throughout North America, at least half of which are livestock producers and a large number are row crop farmers, not only is the interest in and demand for certification growing among producers, food processors, and distributors, but supplying consumer demand is still a challenge, Exo says. Despite today’s hard economic times, he says even price-conscious consumers still want quality food that comes from trustworthy sources, produced with socially and environmentally responsible practices.

“Everything tells me the market is there and in many cases, agriculture and food cooperatives aren’t geared up to meet the demand,” Exo says. “People asked us the same thing — if demand would decline — in 2002 and 2003, the years after 9/11 and the downturn in the economy, but 2003 was the biggest year for certification.”

Marketing opportunities for growers who are producing crops sustainably are endless, with buyers at every level of the distribution chain scrambling to respond to consumers' changing expectations, Exo says.

"Some buyers are seeing the value of independent third-party certification as a screen for their purchases," he says. "Produce distributors are now taking advantage of our Food Alliance handler certification as a way to respond to their customers' needs, and are looking for more certified products to help them round out their supply."

In November, Food Alliance announced its first certification of vertically integrated supply and distribution. With the certification of Pride Packing Co. for sustainable agricultural and management practices, its parent company, United Salad Co., is the first to be certified throughout the entire supply, process, and distribution chain. In 2007, United Salad Co. and the Duck Delivery companies became the first food distributors in the country to be Food Alliance certified.

Pride Packing Co. owns and harvests more than 3,000 acres of orchards in Washington, and grows and packs more than 2.5 million cases of fruit annually. After gaining certification for its apricot, nectarine, and peach orchards and its 60,000-square-foot fruit packing facility, Pride Packing is also seeking certification for its pear, apple, and cherry orchards, with plans to have all of its fruit certified by 2009.

"It's all about transparency from the orchard, through the packinghouse, and into distribution," says Ernie Spada Jr., vice president of United Salad Co., who spearheaded the initiative. "We want our customers to know what we're doing to address important social and environmental issues, and what steps we're taking to become even better. With Food Alliance certification, people have more than just our word that we're trying to be better environmental stewards — they have unbiased proof."

### **Flexibility Is Fair**

Given all the controversy surrounding the effort underway to create a national standard for sustainable agriculture, Exo says he thinks that a diversity of definitions of sustainability can be a strength and that by reflecting on what others are doing, growers will modify their own practices.

"We don't think there needs to be one, universal definition of sustainable agriculture," Exo says. "For the last 10 years, we've been putting forth our own definition and honing it over time — continual improvement is a cornerstone of our approach, and we hold ourselves and our clients to it."

Exo encourages growers who are interested but still unsure about becoming certified to use Food Alliance's online Self Assessment Tool to help benchmark their efforts toward sustainable production. "Even if they're not interested in certification, it's a good way to see where they are, and a great resource," Exo says.