

THE PACKER

Washington, Oregon market pushes for environmentally friendly packs

More and more, the Northwest is adopting a sustainable attitude toward fresh produce packaging.

“The whole industry has changed,” said Ron Haas, owner of R&R Brokerage Inc., Portland, Ore. “Everyone is trying to be as green as possible. The days of the wax cartons are gone. Purveyors that sell institutional, they want it to be recyclable or biodegradable.”

Part of the trend is pushed by preference, while some of it is mandated. For instance, Portland has banned Styrofoam containers.

United Salad Co., Portland, is among the region’s leaders in sustainable packaging. The company is Food Alliance-certified for sustainability in packaging, said Ernie Spada Jr., vice president and owner.

“We’ve received an award every year from the city of Portland for recycling,” Spada said. “It’s at the forefront of our thought process.”

United Salad has transitioned to recycled paper for some of its tomato packaging, he said. “We’re pushing our suppliers for recyclable, green packaging. Our vendors know they need to have it.”

Spada said United Salad’s customer base is not pushing incredibly hard on his company for more sustainable packaging than is already offered.

“They know we’re already doing all we can,” he said, adding that he expects more innovations in the next year on sustainable packaging.

Organically Grown Co-op, Eugene, Ore., has been encouraging suppliers to look into sustainable and recyclable packaging, said senior executive Tom Lively.

A Seattle-area grower that Organically Grown works with is thinking about using a palm-fiber clamshell with cellulose packaging cap for blueberries, Lively said.

“That would be 100 percent biodegradable pack,” he said. “It’s really interesting to try to move people in that direction, at the same time making sure retail is ready to go with it.”

New Seasons Markets, a Portland chain that Organically Grown works with, is testing bulk produce in returnable plastic containers, he said.

“The process is still a little clumsy because there’s not an RPC washing facility in the Northwest,” he said. “They’re a homegrown chain and their push is local, local, local, so sending RPCs outside the area to wash is counter to that idea.”

Botsford & Goodfellow Inc., Clackamas, Ore., has supplied sweet corn in RPCs to some of the region’s major chains, said Chuck Botsford, president.

“Another major retailer has requested us to look at RPCs,” Botsford said. “Of course Wal-Mart’s use of RPCs is well-known.”

When selling packaged produce, Seattle-based PCC Natural Markets puts an emphasis on using sustainable or recyclable packaging, said Joe Hardiman, produce merchandiser.

“The struggle is that the producers themselves are having a hard time coming up with a packaging that works across many items,” Hardiman said. “We’re trying to get away from petroleum-based packaging.”

L&M Cos. Inc., Raleigh, N.C., also is trying to reduce the amount of plastics used in shipping, said Lon Hudson, organics sales specialist in the Selah, Wash., L&M office.

“Packaging is important. We do a lot of sales through wholesalers to Puget Sound co-ops who want sustainable packaging and organics,” Hudson said.

Additionally, L&M’s organic program under the Disney label includes recycled packaging, he said.

Retailers continue to be abuzz about recyclable packaging, said Aaron Quon, greenhouse category manager for The Oppenheimer Group, Vancouver, British Columbia.

Oppenheimer’s master cartons are made with a minimum of 50% recycled fibers and use water-based inks, Quon said, adding that the company is looking to increase the amount of recycled fiber it uses, as long as it can do so without compromising product quality.

The company’s organics are sold in EarthCycle packaging made of palm fiber, which can biodegrade in backyard compost in about 90 days, he said, adding that, “Houweling Nurseries, one of our largest growers, uses bleach-free packaging.”

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