

Food Alliance Interview:

Andrew Wilcox, Director of Operations, Wilcox Family Farms

Wilcox Family Farms is the first company to earn Food Alliance certification for egg production and processing. Wilcox Farms is a fourth generation, family-run business headquartered in Roy, Washington with farms in Oregon and Washington. The company provides over 400,000 shell eggs (dozens) and 150,000 pounds of liquid eggs per week to grocery stores, bakeries and food service operations. The company's organic shell eggs, organic liquid eggs, and cage-free brown eggs will now display the Food Alliance Certified label.

Q:

Over the last year there have been a number of news stories related to the egg industry (California's Proposition 2, major restaurant chains increasingly sourcing cage-free eggs, and most recently the salmonella recall). How have these stories affected your business?

A:

I think because of some of the issues in the media, consumers are developing an awareness and seeking out cage-free, organic, or Food Alliance Certified eggs. As our business grows, we're able to convert our farm over to cage free and Food Alliance Certified at about 10% per year. Demand is growing at about the same rate.

Q:

How has your business changed in response that increasing demand for cage-free and certified products? As you make sustainability improvements, how are your practices changing?

A:

We're a company that has caged egg production. Five years ago we stopped investing in battery cages and started converting our facilities over to cage-free, which was a requirement of becoming Food Alliance Certified. To convert each chicken house to cage-free costs about a million dollars. So there are challenges, not only on the demand side, but financial challenges that make the conversion difficult.

You know, we'd like to convert everything over immediately. But we have to have a long-range plan to convert over to these new systems.

Q:

How much of your production is now Food Alliance Certified? How has your marketing changed to communicate your commitment to social and environmental responsibility?

A:

About 20% of our eggs are now Food Alliance Certified, and we're increasing that at 10% per year. Certifications like Food Alliance and Salmon Safe help us promote the positive attributes of our farming. We try to be clear about how we treat our animals, such as providing outside space and other healthy and humane animal husbandry practices.

Q:

What production and handling practices do you employ to ensure the highest quality/safety of your eggs? How do these practices compare with regulatory requirements and industry standards?

A:

We take product quality very seriously and invest in prevention programs. One of the unique things about our houses is that our grandfather built them about half mile from each other, which helps prevent the spread of disease. That's different from the more modern approaches of confining production in a relatively small space.

But food safety issues can happen to anyone. What matters is how you respond and how much of your resources and management are focused on quality and ensuring a good product. You know, there are a couple of large-scale producers that push it, but they are the bad apples. The majority of the industry follows good practices because their customers require it.

Q:

Wilcox Farms recently earned some awards and recognition for green/sustainable business practices. What are some examples of award-winning practices that you are most proud of?

A:

I think what I'm most proud is our family's conversion from caged production to cage-free. It's such a huge undertaking that takes our whole company's management and financial resources to accomplish. And there has been a dramatic change in the behavior of our cage-free chickens. So, because it takes so much of our resources to do it, and so much teamwork, the fact that we're doing it successfully and seeing the results, it's really satisfying.

Q:

What is the value of third-party certification and which certifications do you carry? What is the value of Food Alliance certification to your business?

A:

We currently do Oregon Tilth Organic, Salmon Safe, and Food Alliance. Then from a quality standpoint we do British Retail Consortium Certified. We also do OMRI certification for our compost and manure.

Whether the certification is about how you treat your employees, how you treat the environment, or quality control, they are all positive ways to differentiate yourself from your competitors. A lot of times, doing the most sustainable thing isn't the most cost efficient. So need a credible way to differentiate our products and what we do. I think certification has lead to increased sales, but really, it's a positive way of differentiating ourselves from our competitors.

Food Alliance is a nonprofit organization that certifies farms, ranches and food handlers for sustainable agricultural and facility management practices.

Look for the Food Alliance Certified seal!By choosing Food Alliance Certified products, consumers and commercial food buyers can be assured they are supporting safe and fair working conditions, humane treatment of animals, and good environmental stewardship.

For information visit: www.foodalliance.org