



California farmers to offer 'sustainable,' affordable produce

By Kathleen Hennessey
September 7, 2005

SACRAMENTO - Shoppers attracted to organic fruits and vegetables but repelled by their bank account-busting prices may soon have an alternative.

That's the hope of environmentalists, farmers and public officials pushing to certify, label and market produce grown according to a set of agricultural standards labeled as sustainable.

Certified growers must meet requirements regarding soil management, water quality, wildlife protection and labor practices, as well as pesticide use.

Supporters say the produce labeled as "sustainable" will be more affordable than organic fruits and vegetables.

"We're trying to get to those consumers in the middle," said Carolyn Brickey, executive director of Protected Harvest, a Maryland-based nonprofit that certifies produce as being grown according to the practices.

Brickey said too many Americans can't afford to pay top dollar for organic produce: "We're trying to break that barrier."

The group also will have to break into one of the largest produce markets in the country and faces opposition from a well-established organic industry that doesn't welcome the competition.

"These new eco-label and verification schemes tend to really just muddy the waters with questions," said Jake Lewin, a director of marketing at California Certified Organic Farmers, an organic certification and trade group. "It's not clear to consumers, 'What is this product and why should you want it?'"

This summer, Protected Harvest received about \$500,000 in grants from state and federal agencies to help fund the labeling system. The money will support the development of standards for a brand of so-called sustainable tomatoes in California, billed as the 'Sacratomato' because the produce is grown in fields near the state capital.

The group also has plans to certify sustainable strawberry, plum and nectarine farms. Seven vineyards already have the Protected Harvest certification.

The programs are modeled after the "Healthy Grown" potato, a sustainable russet grown in Wisconsin and certified by Protected Harvest. The group said there are 6,500 acres enrolled in that program, and farmers there used about 54 percent fewer toxic chemicals than the industry standard on that land.

Bruce Rominger, a tomato farmer outside Sacramento, will be one of the first to grow the Sacratomato, which will initially be marketed to processing plants.

He said he doesn't want his tomatoes to be niche products. He thinks the benefit of sustainable certification is that the label is designed to be practical and profitable for large operations.

Protected Harvest's certification program does not prohibit farmers from using synthetic pesticides - one of the most notable differences between it and organic certification. Farmers are scored on their pesticide practices and are asked to do detailed research before applying chemicals. Less is better, but other factors are considered, Rominger said.

"If you can't use chemical herbicide, you have to kill those weeds some other way," he said. "One way is to go out with a tractor and cut them out, but that costs you money, too, and you're burning diesel and you're stirring up the ground and could be causing erosion."

Aside from pesticide use, Protected Harvest mandates conservation practices, such as leaving buffer zones around trees and waterways to protect wildlife. It also requires farmers to train workers in certain practices, but it does not dictate a minimum wage or requirements for health benefits or checking immigration status.

"We felt we were just not in a position to be able to enter that territory yet. As you can understand, that's highly volatile," said Cliff Ohmart, a Protected Harvest board member who helped develop the standards for vineyards.

"We want to make sure that the standards you create are something that can actually be achieved from an economic perspective. You don't want to end up with standards nobody can achieve."

Ohmart acknowledges the group has some marketing to do before consumers will recognize its produce as healthy and environmentally sound.

Protected Harvest's board of directors includes representatives from the World Wildlife Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the California Tree Fruit Agreement, an industry group. It's funded by state and federal grants, private foundations and Whole Foods Market. Potato farmers in Wisconsin said their biggest challenge has been persuading retailers to take on another niche product.

"When you explain the concept to the consumer, it is very, very well received. All of us like to feel like we're making a difference in the world," said Chris Anthony, a potato grower in Scandinavia, Wis., 60 miles west of Green Bay. "But our challenge has been with the retailers. For them, it's like, 'Oh, here's one more product you want us to carry.'"

Healthy Grown has invested in marketing its potatoes to retailers. Once the produce gets to the stores, it distinguishes itself from organic produce with its price tag.

A 50-pound carton of conventional russet potatoes costs about \$9 a carton, while potatoes labeled as Healthy Grown are about \$11. Organic russets cost nearly three times that, said Dave Tietz, a national sales manager for Alsum Produce Inc., a Wisconsin grower and packer.

Protected Harvest says it's too soon to know what the Protected Harvest California produce will cost. But farmers such as Rominger say they're commitment to the project is about more than profit.

"I want somebody else to be able do this on this land 100 years from now," he said.