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Organic food? Sure, but is it cage-free?

Some US consumers want labels that tell if food is local and animals are treated humanely.

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CHICAGO - The organic industry may be one of the fastest-growing niches of the food world, but for a small group of consumers organic is passé.

Instead, they're pushing for reliable information that would tell consumers whether industrial or family farms produced the food, whether that food was grown locally, and whether farms treated their animals "humanely."

That makes for a crowded label. Nevertheless, some food retailers and producers are starting to respond. For example:

- Whole Foods announced last week a \$10 million low-interest loan program to help local farmers – as well as other efforts to get local products into their stores.
- The Association of Family Farms announced last week new standards – and a new seal – to assure buyers that food isn't just raised humanely and sustainably but also comes from small family farms.
- Equal Exchange, the company that helped develop the "Fair Trade" certification carried on chocolate, coffee, and other international products, announced that it has introduced a few products from US farmers using sustainable practices and receiving fair compensation.
- Burger King said this week that 2 percent of its eggs and 10 percent of its pork will come from farms that do not confine animals in cages or pens that severely restrict movement. The company expects those targets to rise as more cage-free eggs and nonconfined pork becomes available.

"It's all about as much information as possible for people," says Jim Slama, president of the nonprofit environmental group Sustain, as he tours booths offering organic raw-milk

cheese and grass-fed beef from small Midwest farmers. "Organic is great, but people are concerned that big business has come in. There's a whole alternative movement."

The FamilyFarmed.org conference, sponsored by Sustain and held in Chicago this past weekend, is evidence for how the movement is growing and how far it has to go.

The movement, in one sense, is relatively tiny. The organic industry has been steadily growing at close to 20 percent a year, but it still encompasses only about 2.5 percent of all food sales, according to the most recent 2005 figures. A far smaller subset of consumers who buy organic also care about issues like buying local products or supporting fair-trade principles.

But it's enough awareness to convince some producers – and the organizations that represent them – that there's a need to get even more information to buyers about where their food comes from.

"There are parts of our population that seem willing to pay for what they think food is worth," says David Ward, cochairman of the Association of Family Farms. He argues that conventional US agriculture is designed simply to get the lowest possible prices – but not necessarily best quality – on store shelves.

New-age farmer is green, humane

The standards proposed by the association mean a farmer wouldn't necessarily have to meet the organic qualifications of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). But the farm would need to be family-owned and -run, pass a farm-certification process regarding working conditions, environmental practices, and humane animal care, and enter into long-term fair-compensation contracts.

Mr. Ward hopes the seal and certification process will be in place by fall – and that consumers might start seeing products carrying the seal by early next year.

Equal Exchange, meanwhile, has already started putting some domestic products – pecans, almonds, and cranberries, for now – on shelves, though it may be a while before a fair-trade certification process is in place, says Erbin Crowell, manager of Equal Exchange's domestic fair-trade program.

For now, he's concerned more with instilling fair-trade principles than with a certified stamp on packages.

"It's the movement behind the seal that's important," says Mr. Crowell. And it means getting the farmers' story to consumers. People who buy the Equal Exchange pecans, for instance, can plug the expiration date into a website and learn all about the Southern Alternatives Agricultural Co-op that produced them.

'Fair-trade' farming comes to US

Pursuing domestic standards for a movement that was founded on the need to help third-world farmers get a fair shake out of globalization wasn't easy, Crowell

notes. "We're sticking our neck out a bit." But the company heard enough people ask why Equal Exchange wasn't doing more to help small farmers at home to convince it the time was right.

Ideally, say promoters of such standards, getting consumers more information about the values they care about is good for everyone. But some worry that it could also turn into a bureaucratic nightmare for farmers already struggling to file all the requirements for the USDA's organic label, the "Certified Humane Raised and Handled" label, or a host of others.

"My farmers are concerned about another set of rules and regulations," says George Siemon, CEO of Organic Valley. Most of the farmers represented by his co-op, a large-scale brand that's managed to continue to support small local farms, would meet standards for both family-scale and fair trade – but that doesn't mean they're necessarily looking for several more hoops to jump through. "If we look for another seal, we want to look for one more, not six more," Siemon says. "We'd like to have a unified approach."