UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
EXTENSION
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

HS915

Ecolabeling and the Greening of the Food Market [1]

James J. Ferguson[2]

The recent USDA implementation of national organic standards in October, 2002 has energized farmers seeking new market niches and consumers who are increasingly buying organic foods. Public interest groups, marketing organizations, and agricultural researchers also share a renewed interest in organic farming. This focus on organic farming and sustainable agriculture has spawned a new generation of “ecolabels” that share some organic farming standards while also addressing broader social and trade policy issues. My purpose here is to provide general information about ecolabels and their relevance to Florida growers.

Ecolabeling and Greening Defined

The term “ecolabeling” is derived from the science of ecology which deals with interrelationships among organisms and between organisms and their environment**.** Although "organically grown" and other ecolabels account for probably less than 1% of the total market, these labels and related issues are important because, in “capturing the interface of environmental and trade issues," they may forecast farming and market trends.

“Certified organic” has become the most widely know, USDA-defined ecolabel, including clearly defined soil and crop management programs, especially the avoidance of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, sewage sludge or biosolids, genetically-engineered organisms and ionizing radiation. However, the organic farming movement has generated a broader emphasis on sustainable food production systems, healthful food, and environmental and social justice issues, described as the “Greening of the Food Market.” The term “greening," used by political parties, national government programs around the world, and environmental activists emphasizes sustainability, ecology, grassroots democracy, community-based economics and social justice, among other issues. And while organic growers want to preserve their market niche, they generally support ecolabeling but are concerned that consumers may become saturated and confused by too many different causes, messages, and claims. Another important difference is that organic farming is more farming system-focused whereas ecolabeling is more of a consumer-oriented, market-driven concept. For example, the specific crop production farm or site is important in ecolabeling because “place links label principles and standards with specific crop production fields and establishes a basis for accountability.” This means that a produce should be traceable back to the field in which it was grown. Developing technology called “active smart labels” may also allow shoppers to

1. This document is HS915, one of a series of the Horticultural Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: January, 2003. Please visit the EDIS Web site at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu.

2. James J. Ferguson, professor, Horticultural Sciences Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

point a hand-held computer like a palm pilot at a container of orange juice or a can of tomatoes, and determine exactly where that item was grown and by whom.

The large number of existing ecolabels do not currently have a single, comprehensive standard comparable to the USDA organic standards. However efforts are underway, similar to the USDA organic standards, to develop procedures for initial and continuing certification, continued compliance, and due process for lack of compliance. Some ecolabels already have clearly defined standards that focus on reduced pesticide and fertilizer use, IPM and other sustainable practices. Since ecolabels do not generally prohibit pesticide use or require a minimum pesticide residue standard (5% of allowable EPA standards, under USDA National Organic Standards), there is no transition period after initial certification by some ecolabel programs. In contrast, there is a 3-year transition period from conventional to certified organic production. Ecolabels do, however, offer conventional growers, who support sustainable environmental and social justice issues, an option to demonstrate their stewardship with fewer barriers to adoption. The Consumers Union has also created a searchable Web site (http://www.ecolabels.org) about specific ecolabels currently found on food, wood, personal hygiene, and household cleaning products.

Ecolabel Examples

Some examples of ecolabels that may be relevant to Florida growers are "Protected Harvest," supported by the World Wildlife Fund, the University of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association. This group markets "Healthy Grown" potatoes produced under a bio-IPM management system that measures and restricts pesticide use. The Food Alliance, based in Oregon and Minnesota, already provides ornamental and citrus grower certifications in southern Florida and promotes sustainable agriculture practices through market-based incentives. It also develops promotional strategies, and establishes and maintains third-party-verifiable standards for producers and processors. Another proposed ecolabel, "Food Miles" takes into account food miles (the distance food travels from where it is grown to where it is distributed, purchased, and consumed and the amount of food product transported) to provide consumers with a relative indicator about the transport-related environmental impact of their purchases. Sustainable seafood ecolabeling organizations like Seafood Watch and the Marine Stewardship Council promote environmentally responsible fishery and aquaculture operations through ecolabeling and directed marketing campaigns. These organizations also evaluate the status of the fish stocks, the impact of fisheries on ecosystems and the effectiveness of the fisheries management system. "Grown and Picked in the USA by Workers Paid a Living Wage," based in Immokalee, Florida, addresses social and economic challenges faced by growers and seasonal workers with the goal of empowering both as a force for change and improvement. Using an entrepreneurial approach "Harvest for Humanity" (http://www.aboutharvest.org/) works to ensure financially secure, year-round workers "through the implementation of an living wage concept and to increase the value of farm products through a cause-related label that incorporates key sustainability issues, including safely grown, local origin, and social justice." The North Florida Food Partnership, currently being developed by Quality Certification Services, a Florida organic certifying agency, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and local growers will include both certified organic and other growers and will soon have a web site.

Implications for Florida Growers?

Operations that sell less than $5,000 a year in organic agricultural products are exempted from certification but they must operate in compliance with these regulations and may label products as organic, according to published regulations. Such farmers and also those within the three-year transition process from conventional to organic farming could market crops under some ecolabels. Conventional farmers who are already committed to sustainable practices but who do not want to become organically certified might also market crops under ecolabels that are less restrictive than organic ones. Innovative partnering already existing in other states like Wisconsin between the USDA, the World Wildlife Fund, fruit and vegetable growers associations, and land grant

universities could also be developed in Florida. These partnerships could create new national and international market niches under the auspices of not only organic but other certification programs for strawberries, tomatoes, citrus, and other crops.

However, those in the ecolabeling movement stress that in the near future, synergy rather than competition among the various ecolabeling programs, especially in developing uniform, comprehensible standards, will be the keystone for market stability.