

From: Brett Melone
Sent: Wednesday, January 10, 2007 11:24 AM
To: Susan Clark

Dear Susan,

I am attaching a recent article from the Monterey County Weekly which highlights much of the food systems work that ALBA has conducted over the past year, thanks in large part to the support of the Columbia Foundation.

Thank you very much for your continued support. We will continue to work hard to earn it.

Sincerely,

Brett Melone

Organic Evolution

Many Salinas Valley residents don't have access to the organic crops they pick.

Dec 28, 2006

By Zachary Stahl



Sowing Opportunities: ALBA has set up small farmers markets in the valley to make it easier to buy and sell organic.— *Jane Morba*

Walking slowly down a muddy farm road, Deborah Yashar points to a row of white, sweet-smelling flowers planted next to green shoots of broccoli. The alyssum flower attracts beneficial insects that protect crops from pests, Yashar says. Yashar is the food systems project coordinator for the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), which provides guidance and subsidized land to small organic farmers.

A gray and cloud-covered sky envelops the soggy, 112-acre farm located about eight miles south of Salinas. Yashar, who wears a black, button-up jacket on top of a purple jumper, points to a plot of strawberries on the other side of an old farmhouse. Despite the near-winter weather, the berries grow under the white metal arches of a hoophouse, which is essentially a portable greenhouse. Santa Rosa Organics, a family-owned company, grows the strawberries and then sells them to Trader Joe's.

This is good news for people who shop at the specialty grocer. But there aren't any Trader Joe's in the Salinas Valley. And Trader Joe's isn't a usual shopping destination for the valley's low-income residents.

Grocery stores sampled in the farm-worker neighborhoods of east Salinas don't carry organic, locally grown produce, according to a community food assessment report released by ALBA earlier this year.

Additionally, farmers markets are hard to come by in south Monterey County.

As a result, the same people who pick the crops don't have access to the valley's healthy bounty. "It's ironic that here in the Salinas Valley—the Salad Bowl of the World—it can be hard to find quality produce," Yashar says.

ALBA is trying to change this scenario by setting up more farmers markets and farm stands in front of places like churches. These efforts are part of ALBA's long-term plan to distribute homegrown, organic produce to low-income people and farmworkers in the Salinas Valley.

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Florentino Callazo, ALBA's Salinas farm manager, stands in the association's shop, wearing a black corduroy Dole jacket. The shop has tall, metal garage doors and cement floors. This past summer Callazo says he helped his wife Maria Luz Reyes set up her produce stand on Sunday mornings in front of Sacred Heart Parish in Salinas.

Callazo says his wife and their 16-year-old son Fabian were part of a rotation of five farmers who sold organic crops to the parishioners. "It's a great idea," Hernandez says of the farm stand. "It's good to grow the business. It's a few people. The prices are good."

ALBA collaborated with the Catholic Diocese of Monterey to set up the unique coupling of sermons and organic produce. Patrick Mooney, youth and adult ministry director for the Diocese of Monterey, says they are looking to bring back the farm stand this spring. Mooney says the Diocese is also considering bringing more farm stands to the Santa Cruz area. In addition to the farm near Salinas, ALBA also has a 196-acre farm in the Elkhorn Slough watershed.

New farmers markets are also expected to sprout up next year in the Salinas Valley. A farmers market is being organized in Soledad, with a June start date. Greenfield is also supposed to start a farmer's market next year, Yashar says.

ALBA farmers already sell their crops at the marketplace in Oldtown Salinas on Saturdays. Moreover, farmers sell organic produce on Thursdays at the Women, Infants and Children office at 632 East Alisal St. The Alisal Education Foundation is working with the city to find a location for a marketplace in east Salinas that will offer certified organic fruits and vegetables.

But would poor people in the Salinas Valley buy organic produce if it were more readily available? This is one of the questions that ALBA and other organizations asked 10 focus groups for the food assessment report called "The Face of Food on the Central Coast."

Organic premiums typically run 20 percent higher than conventional. But according to the study, low-income and middle class people will pay the extra money if it isn't more than 10 percent higher than

conventional food—and if it’s available where they normally shop.

The study shows that organic is not a fringe market, Yashar says. “Organic isn’t this elitist thing,” she says. “It’s a community health awareness.”

Moreover, produce sold at farmers markets and food stands is priced lower than in supermarkets. When farmers can sell directly to the consumer without an intermediary, the price of fruits and veggies—even organic ones—are typically reasonable.

Another inexpensive way to access fresh, locally grown produce is to sign up for weekly produce box deliveries called Community Supported Agriculture programs. Companies like the Monterey Bay Aquarium and Pebble Beach Company host these programs for their employees.

ALBA trains people to farm and then helps them find outlets to keep the crops local.

This year 17 people are enrolled in ALBA’s six-month class that teaches organic farming techniques. Once they graduate from the course, participants can rent a half-acre of land from ALBA to grow fruits and vegetables. ALBA farmers can then sell produce to places like UC Santa Cruz and the Alisal Union School District in Salinas through distributor ALBA Organics.

In addition to helping farmers become independent, direct marketing approaches like these help consumers understand how a product gets from field to fork, Yashar says.

“If all of the food is exported a thousand miles away...we never have that understanding of how food is grown and how it gets to us.”

The health benefits of eating fresh produce are another reason ALBA is pushing for more access for locally grown crops. More than 70 percent of men and 52 percent of women in Monterey County are overweight or obese, according to a 2005 Monterey County Health Department report. These are higher percentages than the state averages of 66 percent for men and 45 percent for women.

The percentage of California agricultural workers with unhealthful weight is even higher than the general population, according to a 2000 study by the California Institute for Rural Studies cited in the food assessment report. “It is sadly ironic that the hard labor and sweat of those who produce such an abundance of healthy fruits and vegetables suffer from the effects of poor nutrition,” the report says.

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