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Organic Farming's Labor Problem

By Andrea Blum

It may surprise you to know that strawberries are the only fruit with seeds on the outside — bite-size uramaki's of the fruit world, plump with flavor. Members of the rose family, they were a feast food in Roman times, and medieval alchemists considered them a panacea. The start of strawberry season is only a month away. It also might be a surprise to learn that 45 minutes south of SF in Davenport is the country's first and only organic strawberry farm with unionized labor.

The owner of Swanton Berry Farm, Jim Cochran, told me unionizing was a leap of faith. Expenses are huge for a mid-size organic farm — 25 percent higher than the normal costs of an organic farm. But labor issues weren't being held to the same standard as certified organic farming practices. "I felt it's better to do something than to tell others what to do." So, eight years ago, Cochran contracted with the United Farm Workers Union.

For Cochran, it was a natural fit to merge organic farming with the union label. He cites Caesar Chavez's inclinations toward organic farming methods (Chavez's portrait hangs inside the farm's roadside stand where Cochran sits, and he refers to the labor leader by first name). The workers at Swanton Berry Farm, who range from 35 to 60 people during the peak season, get a living wage, time off, low-cost housing, full benefits, year-round work, and soon, profit-sharing. He also hired an outside organization to help with Spanish and communication skills that have enabled him to talk with his workers about subjects beyond farming— like family life and feeling part of the community. He said he is able to pull this off financially by selling 40 percent of his produce, which includes ollaliberries, artichokes, broccoli and cauliflower, directly to customers while 50 percent of his berries go to Whole Foods at premium prices.

The need for social equity is sometimes overlooked in the organic and sustainable farming world. People talk about fair trade coffee in Guatemala but somehow forget about the men, women, and even children who harvest and grow food in our own backyard. People assume that buying organic means supporting healthy agriculture and fair labor practices. This is not always true. Labor standards are not part of the USDA organic certification process. It's also important to remember that state standards in agriculture run on a different punch card — a workweek is 60 hours with 10-hour workdays and a worker's minimum age is 12.

Cochran compares today's organic labor norms to the state of organic farming prior to certification when farmers felt the importance to codify their farming methods so as to bring them to the public's attention. For Cochran, the union label was one way to call attention to the problem of sub-standard labor conditions: "The public has no consciousness about this," he said. "It's important to raise the issue in the public domain."

Labor standards vary widely in organic cultivation. With the growth of industrial-scale organic farms like the Dole's and Heinz's, which employ hundreds of workers who harvest the crops, there is ample room for abuse. The large-scale model dilutes the original intent of organic farming. Big Ag not only mistreats the soil through monocropping and monoculture practices but it also shortchanges farm workers. Because third parties contract many of these workers, the farmer may have no contact with the labor force, and the middleman (who has much of the power) takes his

cut of the wages. Seasonal workers are expendable and many have no health insurance or guarantee of a living wage.

This also happens in small farm operations. A Petaluma organic farmer who owns just six acres told me that, when desperate for labor, he finds himself dealing with shady characters on street corners who supply labor at a fee. The same farmer, though, also hires full-time migrants at nine-dollars-an-hour — some of whom live on the farm at no cost. He has also traveled with workers to Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala to visit with their families, thus creating a stronger community bond.

Ron Strochlic, Executive Director of the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis, is researching these very issues. He says it isn't about farmers-versus- farmworkers but more about elusiveness: agro-business and overseas operations co-opting the small organic farm model. Smaller sustainable farmers, he found, want to improve labor conditions but believe that they can't afford to so. Stochlic has found some simple ways to improve conditions while maintaining an economically viable farm — things like respectful treatment with "no yelling" policies or eating lunch with the workers are no-cost options with big impacts. Some corporations like Kaiser Permanente, he noted, are beginning to address their food policies by getting their food from local farms and by adding a social component to policy, one that promotes agricultural systems that treat farmworkers fairly. It's a step in the right direction.

Even so, there is room for improvement. There are farmers — like Cochran and others — with a full set of solid values who are looking beyond organic farming to find ways to improve the social equity standards of sustainable agriculture. Many growers are doing the best they can: "The union label is one way to codify labor practices," he says. "Another is creating a third-party certification program. It's important for those of us doing it to talk about it."

Andrea Blum writes about food issues for CG.

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