

Fairness in farming

Equitable Food Initiative and Fair Trade USA are two nonprofit certification programs focused on improving farmworker conditions and agricultural standards worldwide, which in turn lessens environmental impacts and improves food safety.

by Christina Guerrero



A farmworker holds strawberries harvested at Buenaventura Ranch, an Equitable Food Initiative-certified farm in Santa Maria, California. ANDREW & WILLIAMSON



Daniel Reyes, a farmworker, and his two sons receive their first dental exam through a program in Mexico provided by Fair Trade Certified premium funds. NICOLE FRANCO



El Milagro de Baja farm head security guard Alfonso Santiago Velazco. EDGAR PINTO



Workers harvest berries at EFI-certified GoodFarms, in Oxnard, California. ANDREW & WILLIAMSON



A hand-washing station at Rancho Don Juanito, an EFI-certified strawberry farm, in San Quintín, Mexico. CHRISTINA GUERRERO

As she drives through the El Milagro de Baja farm fields, located in San Quintín and Camalú, Mexico, Alfonso Santiago Velazco, the head security guard for El Milagro de Baja, tells me how the work culture used to be different. Workers were too intimidated to report problems on farms—from working conditions to safety concerns—where the culture was to keep your head down.

"I have seen many changes and we have also seen how people themselves have collaborated to give their point of view. They have known their rights as well as their obligations," says Santiago Velazco, who was elected by his co-workers to be part of a team to help improve conditions on the farm. "We have seen a result, not only in work, but in the way [workers] live in and out of the field."

Empowering the farmers

Seven years ago, El Milagro de Baja partnered with Fair Trade USA (fairtrade certified.org) and a year later with Equitable Food Initiative (EFI; equitable food.org), two nonprofit certification programs focused on improving working conditions for farmworkers and raising agricultural standards internationally. Farms in the U.S. and other countries certified by EFI and Fair Trade are paid a premium by retailers for produce meeting the requirements of the programs. El Milagro

de Baja supplies strawberries to Costco through its parent company, Andrew & Williamson Fresh Produce, under the GoodFarms brand.

The organizations provide workers with updated training on health and food safety regulations, including hygiene, proper hand-washing and sanitation. Workers are also trained on how to identify sexual harassment in the workplace and on health and safety issues, including injury prevention, with instructions on warm-up exercises and proper use of equipment.

For example, harvesters often struggled to carry boxes of fruit with a cord that caused back pain. Now, they wear belts to protect their backs and use carts to transport the produce. "Not only have they been given the equipment, but they have also been given training on how to use it so they don't get hurt," Santiago Velazco says.

Being part of the organizations has enabled the farms to act quickly on current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, including social distancing. For example, Andrew & Williamson has increased sanitizing of communal areas, carts and tools, and farmworkers wear personal protective equipment, such as face coverings and gloves. Costco produce supplier Driscoll's, which became Fair Trade Certified four years ago for berries grown in and around Vicente Guerrero, Baja California, distributed hundreds of hands-free sanitizing and hand-washing stations in key growing regions.

Protecting the environment

In addition to improving farmworker conditions, EFI and Fair Trade support lessening the environmental impacts of agricultural businesses.

Farms are expected to reduce the amount of pesticides used on crops in conjunction with pesticide-management tactics. For example, farm-friendly insects, such as ladybugs, are introduced to eat other pests that are harmful to crops. Marigolds planted at the end of rows deter unwanted insects. Strips and boxes holding a liquid that attracts and traps pesky insects are placed around the perimeters.

Some farms also use vacuum-cleaner-like machines that suck up unwanted pests. Others have microbiology teams that produce beneficial fungi, which are applied to the soil to fight pathogens that are harmful to plants. And others use rainwater reservoirs or water desalination plants to help with water management, providing water for the crops through drip irrigation systems or micro sprinklers instead of traditional sprinkler systems, where about 60% of the water is carried away by wind or lost to evaporation.

How Fair Trade works

Fair Trade USA focuses on empowering farmworkers and training farm management to collaborate to solve issues through the implementation of Fair Trade certification, which includes more than 200 social, economic and environmental protections.

"Besides certifications, we're also in the business of changing hearts and minds," says Nathalie Marin-Gest, head of fresh goods at Fair Trade USA. "It's a matter of showing why people need to make the changes ... and why treating the environment and the people better is actually good business."

There are 170 Fair Trade Certified producers and producer groups worldwide that sell produce and floral items, 50 of which are Costco suppliers with farms located in the U.S., Mexico, Chile and Guatemala. The premium paid for Fair Trade Certified produce is used to address the needs of workers and their families, in the form of additional income and community development projects. An elected committee of the workers evaluates the community's needs and is empowered to design, implement and administer projects approved by their peers.

"The responsibility is shared," says Diego Rodriguez, senior manager for produce and floral at Fair Trade USA. "The business owns the certification, but the fair-trade committee is charged with the responsibility of managing the funds according to the rules of the fair-trade standard."



Employees of Driscoll's, one of Costco's Fair Trade Certified berry suppliers, meet with Costco buyer Todd Eagan (far right) in a strawberry field located in Baja California. CHRISTINA GUERRERO

COSTCO CONNECTION

Look for Equitable Food Initiative–certified and Fair Trade Certified food at your local Costco warehouse.

Through Driscoll's, premium funds have financed a wide variety of projects. Much-needed laundry facilities are being planned for the coming year. Money has gone toward book bags and school supplies for 2,000 workers' children, 360 scholarships for primary through university-level schools and more than 400 roof repairs on workers' houses. Three health fairs were held featuring special-practice doctors, such as pediatricians, opticians and dentists, providing services for close to 5,000 people.

One of the events was for workers and the larger community, says Lorena Jasmin Mendoza, a harvester and fairtrade committee secretary. "It's the only project we've done to benefit the entire community, and we had a lot of patients who went to that fair because it was for everyone," she says.

In another project, water storage tanks were added to provide 812 families with vital cooking and bathing water at their homes. Public water availability is unpredictable in this water-challenged community. "I can fill [my container] and I have enough for the week, and I don't have that struggle," says Jasmin Mendoza, who has four children. "We don't suffer over water scarcity in my home anymore."

The EFI approach

EFI's approach also focuses on empowering farmworkers at all levels to help solve issues on the farms.

"The EFI structure helps change the culture on the farm," explains LeAnne Ruzzamenti, the organization's director of marketing communications. "We create an open, trustworthy culture where farmworkers are engaged and have a voice, which improves working conditions throughout the whole farm."



TOMATO: © MATIN / STOCK.ADOBE.COM AVOCADO: © ANNGUYEN / STOCK.ADOBE.COM

An elected leadership team of farmworkers and managers is trained in communication, collaboration and problem-solving skills, and then applies those skills to help the farming operation meet EFI standards, which focus on working conditions, food safety and pest management.

From the consumers' perspective, the EFI certification on fruits and vegetables signifies that the workers harvesting the produce have been treated respectfully and compensated fairly, says Ruzzamenti. And growers are assured that the workforce has been given the skills and support to address critical issues like food safety and traceability, so they can excel in a global marketplace.

Currently, 37 farms have been certified (22 in Mexico, 12 in the U.S., two in Canada and one in Guatemala) and 22 more are pending certification with leadership trained. This means some 36,000 workers are on farms with trained EFI teams.

Retailers pay a premium on certified produce, which appears on the workers' checks as an EFI bonus. In the first five years of the program, more than \$8 million in farmworker bonuses have been generated. Ely Morales, the EFI secretary at Rancho Don Juanito, a farm in San Quintín where she has worked for 10 years, says her co-workers are happy with the bonus and gladly do their part to comply with all the rules.

Growers also benefit from engaged workers who report higher work satisfaction and help solve issues. Amalia Zimmerman-Lommel, director of social responsibility for Andrew & Williamson Fresh Produce, says the program relieves pressure on farm managers, because now the workforce is communicating, collaborating and problem-solving. That in turn increases productivity and quality.

"No person or situation is perfect, so continuous improvement is part of this culture change," Zimmerman-Lommel says. "The culture change goes both ways, from the workforce to top management, there is improvement for all and everyone participates in improving processes with clear and transparent communication."

Produce at Costco

Costco supports the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) and Fair Trade USA programs by paying the premium for certified produce, which is labeled with a seal. The Costco buying team encourages suppliers to participate in the training.

"EFI and Fair Trade USA each provide a verifiable program that helps enrich the lives of agricultural workers while empowering them to harvest a better-quality product for Costco," says Keith Neal, assistant general merchandise manager for Costco produce.—CG

Annual audits

Both EFI and Fair Trade USA work with a third-party-certified auditing body to verify the farms are following the standards set by each organization.

When audits are completed and farms are certified, which can vary in length of time depending on the number of workers, the farms are allowed to label produce as coming from a certified supplier. Annual audits, which include worker interviews, are conducted to ensure the farms remain in compliance and any new workers have been trained.

The certificate holder is responsible for reporting to the nonprofit, as well as the committees, the amount of product sold. This determines the amount of premiums generated, which are evaluated and audited as well.—*CG*
