

Developing Standards for Domestic Fair Trade

BY KERSTIN LINDGREN

We sometimes describe the Domestic Fair Trade Association (DFTA) as a movement of movements. We count among our members farmers and their organizations, farmworkers and their organizations, cooperative retailers, processors and manufacturers, and NGOs (non-government organizations), all of whom have a primary mission or focus that does not explicitly include the words “domestic fair trade.” What each of our members does have is a piece of the puzzle and a vision for how our work fits together.

The collective values and vision of DFTA are captured in the principles of domestic fair trade and include important concepts like fairness regarding wages for and treatment of farm and other workers, support for small and family farmers and producers, democratic or cooperatively run businesses, and empowerment of the traditionally marginalized. (For the complete statement, see *CG* #127, Nov.–Dec. 2006.) We count ourselves among the retailers, producers, farmers, workers, NGOs, and consumers interested in changing the conventional system of agriculture and economy and moving in the direction of health, justice, and sustainability. Important in this process are verification, including third-party certification, education, and setting a high bar.

Domestic Fair Trade certification

Options for domestic fair trade certification are just now emerging. DFTA itself is not developing a label or standards, but is instead interested in ensuring



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the legitimacy and strength of existing and emerging labels.

Several DFTA members are working to provide certification options. For example, IMO—Institute for Market Ecology—has developed a successful international fair trade program and a “Fair for Life” label. They are now piloting those standards in North America.

Four other DFTA members—CATA (the Farmworker Support Committee), Florida Organic Growers, Northeast Organic Farming Association, and RAFI (Rural Advancement Foundation International)—have collaborated on standards under the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP). AJP has developed a “Food Justice Certified” label and recently completed a training of certifiers and worker representatives. Certifiers who complete the training will be able to issue the Food Justice Certified label using AJP standards. A unique requirement of AJP is that trained worker representatives need to accompany certifiers during audits. The AJP standards have already been used by Farmer Direct Cooperative of Canada for its fair trade, organic

grains available in select cooperative food stores throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Although we are not developing a label, DFTA is playing an active role in certification initiatives. One way we have done this is by facilitating a working group on domestic fair trade collaboration. IMO, AJP, and two other organizations, Scientific Certification Services and Fair Trade Sustainability Alliance, have made a formal commitment to collaborate by transparently sharing program information, committing to high-bar practices, and by putting the good of the domestic fair trade movement ahead of competitiveness. Along with a group of stakeholder supporters from across the food and agriculture system, these organizations have periodic phone calls and meetings to share information and set goals for the movement.

Education initiatives

In addition to formal certification, ongoing education efforts are vital to this movement. Since the principles of domestic fair trade are fundamental to our work, it is important that they encompass the



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scope of our vision. To that end, the DFTA board recently reviewed the principles, along with our mission and vision statement, and recommended two additions to our current set of 14. One proposal addresses humane treatment of animals on farms, both those raised for consumption and those used in production of crops. The second proposed principle covers responsible marketing and certification and expresses our concern about “fairwashing,” as we see a proliferation of market claims and labels.

Occasionally, DFTA members reach consensus and publish an educational position statement on an issue of particular importance and timeliness. To date, DFTA has positions regarding immigration reform, fair contracts for farmers, and GMOs (genetically modified organisms in food). These statements are intended to help facilitate discussions, educate consumers, and guide public DFTA comments on relevant legislation or policies.

For example, the statement on GMOs, approved in early July, first outlines concerns about the proliferation of GMOs. These include increasing use of toxic chemicals used on crops genetically modified to withstand herbicide application, health concerns due to inadequate consumption studies, environmental risk due to cross-pollination and herbicide-resistant weeds, and lack of public access since using GM seeds requires farmers to pay a fee and waive their rights to save seeds. The statement goes on to recommend public policy requirements including testing, accountability for patent-holders, transparency and mandatory labeling, and upholding rights of farmers.

The efforts of individual members are equally important. For example, in August, coinciding with the Eat Local Challenge, Bluff Country Co-op in Winona, Minn., posted story signs throughout the

store featuring its local suppliers. The signs, along with the staff, inform customers why the co-op is supporting local farmers and producers and explains the importance of domestic fair trade.

Evaluation

One of the exciting parts of this movement is seeing the many ways retailers and other businesses are already embodying the principles of domestic fair trade. Telling these stories and sharing these examples is key to promoting change. Yet, as we have seen in many movements, when there is success and, in particular, a market advantage attached to that success, sometimes claims are made that cannot be backed up.

DFTA has developed a set of criteria to evaluate whether market claims and fair trade programs are legitimate and strong. We are currently finalizing the criteria and evaluation process and expect to put them into practice in the coming months. We will provide information to consumers, retailers, institutions, and others with purchasing power about which programs and products meet the high bar of domestic fair trade, and by doing this also protect high-bar businesses

from unfair competition.

Annual meeting

Once a year, DFTA brings together stakeholders, including both members and nonmembers, from across the food and agriculture system to network and put forth a vision for justice, health, and sustainability. This year, our meeting will be hosted by Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps and held in San Diego, Dec. 7–9. Consider joining us to help put all of our pieces together and work for change as a single movement. ■

Although we are not developing a label, the Domestic Fair Trade Association is playing an active role in certification initiatives.

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