

Circles of Caring



Pilot Project Supports Fair Labor Practices for Farms

—Marty Butts, Kristina Keefe-Perry, and Elizabeth Henderson

NOFA-NY partners in program to promote a Food Justice Pledge

In the realm of food labels, there are various claims made with degrees of clarity and value. You can tell at a glance if a food is *organic*, *biodynamic*, *low in sodium*, *heart healthy*, or *grown and processed in New York*. Other labels make poorly defined and often unverified claims about a product being “natural,” “gluten free,” or a “product of the USA.” Each tries to represent some value to the consumer to help guide their purchasing choices.

Over the course of NOFA’s 40-year history, the organization has participated in the refining

of the Organic Certification label. We have engaged our members to find out what they think and have pushed for safe, clean food. One of the more highly debated facets of the food system has not yet been added into the National Organic Program (NOP) standards: an agreed-upon definition of fair labor practices within systems of food production. The basic principles of organic agriculture encompass fairness in pricing for farmers, fairness in labor standards for farm workers, and fairness for all aspects of food production—

including processing, retailing, warehousing, and food service—but such fairness issues are not recognized in the USDA organic program.

The Fair Trade Label

Around the world the Fair Trade Label has gained both recognition and value. Fair Trade addresses the inequity in food production that the USDA organic label does not. The main focus of Fair Trade is ensuring that farmers earn a



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living wage. But it's more than that. Fair Trade also emphasizes a process that is socially just and ecologically sound. And through Fair Trade, farmers are empowered through strong, democratic organizations.

Many people have been introduced to the idea of Fair Trade from the international fair trade markets for coffee, chocolate, tea, sugar, rice, and a handful of other commodity products. With the help of fair trade organizations, cooperatives of small-scale farmers in lesser-developed countries have been able to garner a higher farm-gate price and thereby improve their communities.

Domestically, even as great strides have been made in the quality of food production with the work of the NOP and direct access to markets through farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, the idea of fairness, for farmers and farm workers, has mostly been left unaddressed. Immigration policy, industrial scale production, and a culture of "cheap food" have eroded the ability of small, family, and organic farmers to pay their workers a living wage, to make a fair living for themselves, and to invest in the future of their farms and their local communities.

Bringing Fair Trade to US Farms

In an effort to rectify this issue, the Domestic Fair Trade (DFT) movement is addressing the relationships among farmers, laborers, interns, distributors, retailers, and consumers. Domestic Fair Trade recognizes that even in the United States many farmers do not earn a living wage, must make tough choices in regards to paying laborers, and rarely save money to reinvest in

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the farm. The Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) is one of a handful of organizations that have addressed these issues by offering a program of certification in the area of Fair Trade. The AJP is also providing small farmers with assessment and educational tools that can help them begin to price their products at an appropriate cost relative to production and to institute clear and fair labor practices.

NOFA-NY has been working with the Agricultural Justice Project to adapt their certification standards for New York farmers as a pilot Pledge Project in Agricultural Justice. Like the AJP certification standards, the NOFA-NY AJP Pledge standards address the following issues:

- ◆ Workers' rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining
- ◆ Fair wages and benefits for workers
- ◆ Fair and equitable contracts for farmers
- ◆ Fair pricing for farmers
- ◆ Clear conflict-resolution policies for farmers and workers
- ◆ Workplace health and safety
- ◆ Farm worker housing
- ◆ Interns and apprentices
- ◆ Children on farms

Unlike standards used in Fair Trade for international commodity crops, AJP does not set minimum pricing for a specific product. Instead, it focuses on

the relationships among the stakeholders and the process by which they communicate their needs to each other. AJP flexibly allows stakeholders in individual communities to decide what fair wages mean to them; it allows for meaningful participation in the process of production along with opportunities for professional advancement. As a result, the process to determine fair wages and pricing can be long and arduous—but, it is locally meaningful and relevant.

NOFA-NY has recruited a small cohort of farmers to participate in the New York AJP Pledge pilot. Their products will carry the Food Justice Pledge label. These farmers are opening up their farms for inspection in the issues of clear labor contracts, working conditions, and fair pricing. NOFA-NY will be promoting the Food Justice Pledge label to inform consumers of the farms' participation in the program—urging them to pay a voluntary 5 percent premium on produce to support these farms' good efforts towards creating a truly sustainable food system. This fall, NOFA-NY will launch the AJP Food Justice Pledge Label to support these participating farms in seeking to set prices that reflect the true costs of production, including fair wages for farm workers and fair compensation to the farmer as well. We hope you will join us in supporting these farms in their efforts to improve working communications and conditions, invest in farm improvements, and, ultimately, earn a sustainable living in organic farming in New York state!

For more information on the Food Justice Pledge Label program, contact Community Education & Outreach Coordinator Marty Butts at marty@nofany.org or 585-271-1979.