

Organic farming no longer a niche

Operations scale up to meet growing consumer demand

By **TERENCE CHEA**
The Associated Press

SAN JUAN BAUTISTA — Earthbound Farm's fields of organic baby spinach and romaine lettuce are a living symbol of the organic food movement's explosive growth in recent years.

What started two decades ago as a three-acre roadside farm in Carmel Valley has grown into the country's largest grower of organic produce, with more than 100 types of fruits and vegetables on 28,000 acres in the United States and abroad.

Earthbound's extraordinary growth is only the most visible example of how organic farming is changing. Small family farms created as an alternative to conventional agriculture are increasingly giving way to large-scale operations that harvest thousands of acres and market their produce nationwide.

With Wal-Mart, Safeway, Albertson's and other big supermarket chains expanding their organic offerings, the transformation may only be in its early stages.

"I don't think (consumers) have any idea just how industrialized it's becoming," said Michael Pollan, a journalism professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma." "There are some real downsides to organic farming scaling up to this extent."

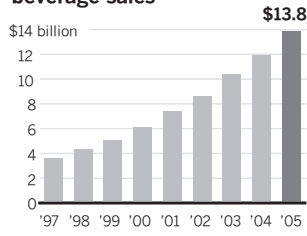
Pollan and others worry that the expansion of "Big Organic" will lower food quality, weaken standards and hurt small family farms. As organic goes mainstream, critics say, the movement loses touch with its roots as an eco-friendly system that offers a direct connection between consumers and the land where their food is grown.

Byron Albano, who handles marketing for Cuyama Orchards, his parents' 210-acre organic apple orchard in Santa Barbara County, worries the entry of Wal-Mart and other supermarket chains will "lead to organic produce becoming a commodity with prices being dictated by those buyers."

Thriving market

Organic food and beverages accounted for 2.5 percent of U.S. food sales last year.

U.S. organic food and beverage sales



SOURCE: Organic Trade Association AP

Other experts say the trend simply gives more consumers access to high-quality food and keeps prices down. It's also good for the environment because fewer pesticides and fertilizers will pollute the air and water.

Despite its size, Earthbound Farm follows the same practices as smaller organic farms. It rotates crops to enrich the soil and avoid disease, doesn't use chemical fertilizers or herbicides, and brings in syrphid flies and other beneficial insects to control pests.

Earthbound's bagged salads and other organic products are now sold in more than 80 percent of U.S. supermarkets.

"Earthbound Farm's mission is to bring the benefits of organic to as many people as possible," said Myra Goodman, who founded the company with her husband, Drew.

Fastest-growing segment

Organic food only makes up 2.5 percent of U.S. food sales, but it's the fastest growing segment of the market. Sales reached nearly \$14 billion last year, up from \$6 billion five years earlier, according to the Organic Trade Association in Greenfield, Mass.

"Consumers see organic products as fitting in with a healthful life," association spokeswoman Holly Givens said.

To meet growing demand from increasingly health-conscious consumers and supermarket chains, farmers and ranchers are scaling up production and converting land to meet organic standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

According to the USDA's rules, organic produce must be grown without synthetic fertilizers or bioengineering and animals must be raised without antibiotics or growth hormones. A separate industry of government-approved organic certifiers has emerged to inspect farms and



Horticulturalist Eric Brennan, left, and Jim McCreight, of the United States Department of Agriculture, walk in an experimental organic research field off Spence Road near Chualar in 2001. Once a curiosity and a niche branch of agriculture, popular demand has pushed organic farming into the mainstream.



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Myra and Drew Goodman, founders of Earthbound Farms, display some of their salad greens in January at their headquarters in Carmel Valley.

food handlers to ensure they conform. Some advocates don't think the rules go far enough and are asking for a requirement that dairy cows be pasture-fed, not raised on feedlots.

The latest USDA survey in 2003 found that 2.2 million acres of farmland and ranchland had been certified organic, but that number is believed to have risen substantially since then, said Jake Lewin, director of marketing at Santa Cruz-based California Certified Organic Farmers, one of the country's largest certifiers.

Another Wal-Mart debate

Concerns about the increasing commercialism of organic

farming reached a new level this spring when Wal-Mart announced it was joining other major grocery chains in ramping up organic sales.

Some small farmers worried that the world's biggest retailer, notorious for squeezing suppliers to get the lowest price, would push them out of business.

Other advocates welcome the news, saying growers would benefit from rising demand and consumers would see prices drop. In the past, organic food has been associated with high-end retailers like the Whole Foods Market chain.

"It will bring organic to a whole new economic stratum that our farmers' markets and

natural food stores have been unable to reach," said Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz.

But others worry that as more farmers shift to organic production to meet the needs of big supermarket chains, they will drive down food quality and weaken standards.

For example, some suppliers have been marketing organic soybeans and other products grown overseas, where it's harder to determine whether farms meet U.S. standards, said Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, in Fin-

ONLINE

- **EARTHBOUND FARM:** www.earthboundfarm.com/
- **ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION:** www.organic-consumers.org/
- **ORGANIC TRADE ASSOCIATION:** www.ota.com

land, Minn. "We're heading for a consumer crisis over standards and the outsourcing of organic products from overseas," Cummins said. "There will be continuing conflict between consumers, the USDA and companies not playing by the rules."

'Democratization of organics'

U.C. Berkeley's Pollan encourages environmentally minded consumers to shop at local farmers' markets. When they buy organic products in supermarkets, those items must be refrigerated and often transported long distances, consuming as much fossil fuel as the conventional food system, he said.

"If organic means anything, it should mean that this food has a lighter environmental footprint," Pollan said. "It's really the supermarket and the supermarket shopper that drive the industrialization of organic."

But Earthbound's Myra Goodman said organic farmers can't be expected to solve the problems of the U.S. food distribution system. Her company has a good relationship with Wal-Mart, whose organic expansion plans represent "the democratization of organics."

"The vast majority of food is bought in supermarkets," Goodman said. "Those people should have an organic choice."

Bill would requires plans for evacuation of livestock

Disaster response proposal follows history of losses

By **SAMANTHA YOUNG**
The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — Martin Poldervaart knows how water can wreak havoc. When a levee burst two miles from his Yuba City dairy farm in 1997, 200 of his cows — more than half of his herd — drowned.

"It was really sad to see what was left over," Poldervaart said. Now, a bill being considered by the California Legislature would direct the state Office of Emergency Services to incorporate animal evacuations into its operational plans. Advocates of the bill spon-

sored by Assemblyman Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, say it will force first responders to take animals into account when evacuating areas threatened by flood waters, earthquakes, wildfires and other disasters.

Critics say such a plan is a waste of taxpayer money and emergency personnel should focus solely on saving human lives. The Assembly has approved it 76-1 and it now awaits Senate consideration.

"Trying to move a 1,600 pound animal that is frightened is a difficult task," said Gary Conover, director of governmental relations for Western United Dairymen. "If you need to move 200 head of cattle, you can't do it yourself. You need to know who you can call and when you can get back on your property."

After the El Niño floods of 1997, the state Department of

Food and Agriculture developed contingency plans to rescue cattle, house displaced animals on county fairgrounds and reunite pets with their owners through a program known as CARES — the California Animal Response in Emergency System.

The program has been implemented by the state when needed. In the spring, the department sent inspectors to the San Joaquin Valley to ensure the health and safety of cattle evacuated from farms near rivers that threatened to overflow their banks.

But the state's lead disaster agency, the Office of Emergency Services, has not formally adopted the program into its emergency planning, and some fear that could threaten federal emergency funding to the state.

In response to Hurricane Katrina, Congress last month

approved a bill that would require local and state preparedness offices to draw up evacuation plans for animals. The bill sponsored by U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., calls for cutting federal emergency grants to states that fail to incorporate animals in their operational planning.

"The sight of evacuees having to choose between being rescued or remaining with their pets, perhaps even having to leave behind their service animals they rely on every day, was just heartbreaking," Lantos said last month on the House floor.

Republican Assemblyman Ray Haynes, who cast the lone dissenting vote against the California legislation, said the Legislature should not spend limited taxpayer money on contingency plans for animals when human lives should be the top priority.

Data helps unravel farm payment web

By **LIBBY QUAID**
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government took a step Thursday toward full disclosure of just who receives billions of dollars in farm subsidy payments each year.

The Agriculture Department released a file that will help unravel the complex web of corporations, partnerships, trusts and other organizations that receive farm payments.

The payments are public information, but tracking down how much individuals receive is difficult and, at times, impossible. The government reports payments to companies or organizations but has not always reported the names of owners or members.

The file released Thursday outlines many of these relationships. However, it omits cooperatives, such as Arkansas-based Riceland

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- **FARM SERVICE AGENCY:** www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/
- **ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP:** www.ewg.org/

Foods, the biggest recipient of farm payments over the past 10 years.

Also omitted is how much money people got. The department said that in August it will issue a detailed accounting of all payments to individuals since 2002.

Ken Cook, president of Environmental Working Group, said the file brings the public closer to knowing where their tax dollars go.

"But the largest recipients ... who receive the lion's share of federal farm subsidy money have yet to have their taxpayer-provided support disclosed," Cook said.