

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter
A Call to Farms



The Little Things that Make a Difference

It is easy to affirm that we need more locally, sustainably, organically/bio produced food. However, what is often less well understood are the enabling regulations that need to be in place to help make that happen. One key set of regulations relates to the requirements of what actually can be sold in the marketplace.

On 1 July 2009, the EU officially repealed the marketing standards for 26 fruits and vegetables (<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/1059&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>). These standards had limited what fruits and vegetables can be sold by virtue of specifying size and shape requirements for "extra", "class I" and "class II". Now other sizes and shapes may be sold as long as they are labelled to distinguish them from the general standards (e.g. sold with a label stating "product intended for processing").

The specific fruits and vegetables which may now be sold in sizes and shapes which some would call odd but I would refer to as "normal" or "natural" are:
apricots, artichokes, asparagus, aubergines, avocados, beans, brussel sprouts, carrots,

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cauliflowers, cherries, courgettes, cucumbers, cultivated mushrooms, garlic, hazelnuts in shell, headed cabbage, leeks, melons, onions, peas, plums, ribbed celery, spinach, walnuts in shell, water melons, and witloof/chicory.

Standards will remain for 10 products (which actually account for 75% of the value of EU trade). These are:

apples, citrus fruit, kiwi fruit, lettuces, peaches and nectarines, pears, strawberries, sweet peppers, table grapes and tomatoes.

Individual EU member states may provide an exemption for these ten. Interestingly, the EU states least in favour of this change were Spain, Italy, and France, the countries you would normally associate with quality food. However, they are also the countries that benefited from the prior limitations on what could be marketed as they have developed "hothouse" and other industrialised fruit and vegetable production.

The EU made this change as part of its attempt to reduce bureaucracy and the amount of "red tape" governing the EU single market. It obviously has the added benefit of supporting quality agriculture by making it easier to get non-standard products on the market. Some estimate that as much as 20% of all produce was rejected previously because

it did not conform to standard sizes (see - www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jul2009/gb2009073_101297.htm)

Thus you may start to see more of these "wonky" fruits and vegetables in EU shops.



Another related effort has long been championed by Slow Food through its *Ark of Taste*. The Ark of Taste is a collection of traditional varieties of plants, fruits and vegetables; often called "heirloom" in the US. Slow Food works to help preserve and re-establish such varieties. You can find more about the Ark and specific products here www.slowfoodfoundation.org/eng/arca/lista.la.sso

Recent projects in the US include efforts to preserve the Marshall strawberry in Maine (www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/blog_post/the_longer_the_wait_the_sweeter_the_jam/), the Bodega Red potato in Sonoma County California (www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/blog_post/bringing_back_the_bodega_red_potato/) and the Marfax Bean near Boston (www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/blog_post/growing_out_magic_beans/)

A similar effort in Switzerland goes under the label Pro Specie Rara (www.prospecierara.ch) Interestingly this group has entered into a marketing arrangement with Coop, one of the two major food retailers in Switzerland (see here for details in English on their program with a link to the Pro Specie Rara program in German, French, and Italian - <http://www.coop.ch/pb/site/common/node/50579/Len/index.html>) And for some more

detail on Slow Food and quality food trends in Switzerland see here - http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/front/Swiss_quick_to_move_into_Slow_Food_fast_lane.html?siteSect=108&sid=11211921&cKey=1253511046000&ty=st

All of this is just to illustrate that there is a range of enabling measures that can and need to be taken to help rebalance the food and agriculture system. It is never going to be a "one size fits all" system and diversity is probably the key to its resiliency. Little changes can make a big difference in the end.

News

During the summer, President Obama launched a new Food Safety Working Group www.foodsafetyworkinggroup.gov/Home.htm. This group, led by Vice President Joe Biden, Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack, and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, is focusing on 5 core principles related to food safety. These are

- Rapidly respond to outbreaks and facilitate recovery
- Expand risk-based inspection and enforcement
- Focus on prevention
- Target resources effectively
- Strengthen surveillance and risk analysis

At an early July conference, the group announced the creation of two new food safety oriented positions and some short term measures. A good summary is on Civil Eats - <http://civileats.com/2009/07/07/food-safety-working-group-definitely-in-the-21st-century/>

Marion Nestle reported early on that the choice for the new special FDA Food Safety Commissioner would be Michael Taylor. You can find views (generally favorable due to Taylor's efforts to ensure HACCP standards across the farm-to-table food chain) here www.foodpolitics.com/2009/07/michael-taylor-appointed-to-fda-a-good-choice/

Resources

The above mentioned Michael Taylor, while at the George Washington School of Public

Health, was co-author of a detailed report released in April 2009, *Stronger Partnerships for Food Safety*, that provides a detailed set of 19 recommendations to build an integrated food safety system in the U.S. This report www.rwjf.org/files/research/20090417foodsafetyfinalreport.pdf is one of the more detailed and practical set of proposals I have seen on the food safety issue.

Those who are skeptical of what Michael Taylor says because of his connection to Monsanto will no doubt also be skeptical of what retired Director of Corporate Affairs for Cargill, Robbin Johnson, has to say. However, I found his recent discussion paper, *Food Security: The Role of Agricultural Trade*, for the International Food & Agricultural Trade Policy Council a fairly balanced and thorough treatment of how to begin changing the global food system to address not only food security but also safety, health, and sustainability. Johnson suggests distinguishing between the emerging markets where food security is the primary concern and developed markets where aspirational values play a much larger role in shaping food choices. Johnson sees trade as a means to optimize what he calls "environmental comparative advantage" to ensure that food is produced in the implied geographic location and in ways that minimize impact on the environment. Johnson suggests refocusing food aid and development assistance to capacity building in emerging markets and shifting trade negotiations on agriculture from a mercantilist focus to one focused on growth in agricultural as a means of development, raising economic productivity, and helping achieve economic diversification. He sees the recent "land grabs" as a clear manifestation of lack of trust in trade in agriculture. Overall he suggests a new dialogue between producers and consumers that puts food security, food safety, and sustainability into a broader context. There are a lot of thought provoking arguments no matter what your viewpoint on big ag. Definitely well worth a read -

<http://agritrade.org/Publications/documents/FoodSecurity.pdf>

Sticking with the large corporate theme, Deutsche Bank research has published a detailed study about investment needs in agriculture. The report is written from a macro viewpoint and does not suggest specific companies or markets to invest in. However, it does contain quite a thorough analysis of what it will take to ensure we have sufficient food and fuel for a population of 9 billion; the report states we need a 50% increase in agricultural productivity. It also provides an interesting side by side on different scenarios for land use adjustment based on current and future climate constraints, an optimized view of land use based on productivity potential, and an alternative vision based on local and organic production. The report, also well worth a read, is here

www.dbcca.com/dbcca/EN/investment_research.jsp This was discussed at the very successful Agriculture 2.0 conference sponsored by New Seed Advisors in New York www.newseedadvisors.com/conference/

Finally, the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service published its latest set of statistics on the usage of genetically engineered crops in the U.S. Well over 80% of all soybeans and over 60% of all cotton and corn in the US are now genetically modified. The statistics and some background information can be found here www.ers.usda.gov/Data/BiotechCrops/

Upcoming Events

2-3 Nov: The UK based think tank, Chatham House, will host a Food Security conference following up on their 2008 conference. That conference led to a report published in 2009 (www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/papers/view/-/id/694/) More information on this year's conference is available here - www.chathamhouse.org.uk/foodsecurity09/

