

Emerging Eco-Labels

Researching perspectives of co-op member-owners

BY LIA SPANIOLA AND PHIL HOWARD



Co-op members place a high degree of trust in co-op staff to ensure that store product offerings are aligned with their values.

Food cooperatives played an enormous role in the rapid growth and eventual mainstreaming of two of the most successful eco-labels: organic and fair trade. The increasing popularity of these labels has helped to move the food system in more ecologically sustainable and socially just directions. Less-well-known eco-labels are in development that seek to address criteria not fully embodied in organic and fair trade, such as the humane treatment of animals, more localized food production, and support for farmers and farmworkers. With so many choices, however, it is difficult to know which of these emerging eco-labels have the greatest possibilities for success. If co-ops are to continue to pioneer support for initiatives that improve the food system, they need to know: 1) which eco-label criteria are most preferred by their member-owners? and 2) why?

To begin to answer these questions, we recently conducted a series of focus groups with members of three different food co-ops located in southern Michigan and compared them with natural food store shoppers recruited in these same three cities. (We had a total of 47 participants divided among six groups.) We analyzed their general motivations when making food purchases, how these applied specifically to a number of emerging eco-labels, and their level of trust in types of certification schemes. Our findings have important implications for co-ops, as we describe below.

General motivations

We found that, like most food purchasers, co-op members and natural food store shoppers were interested in value—obtaining high-quality food at a reasonable price. Their definition of quality is different than for more mainstream food shoppers, as a result of stronger health/nutrition motivations. When compared to natural food store shoppers, co-op members were more likely to have definitions of quality that also encompassed broader political and ethical issues.

Both co-op members and natural food store shoppers wanted to know much more about their

Editor's note: Several charts on the food industry can be found at Phil Howard's webpage: www.msu.edu/~howardp. The present article is linked under Lia Spaniola in "Student Publications." See also his charts on organic industry consolidation: www.msu.edu/~howardp/organicindustry.html

food and wanted more transparency in the food system. They appreciated eco-labels for their ability to convey complex information through an easily recognizable logo, but they also expressed a desire for retailers to provide more in-depth information about eco-label criteria and verification processes.

Views of eco-label criteria

We asked focus group participants about six emerging eco-label criteria, as well as organic standards for comparison. We chose relatively specific criteria for simplicity, although there are some eco-labels, such as Food Alliance Certified, that encompass multiple criteria. (An overview of eco-label programs for farmers in the United States can be found at www.msu.edu/~howardp/ecolabelsUS.pdf.) While focus group participants were generally supportive of all the criteria, we'll describe the reasons they gave for supporting each criterion, in roughly descending order of preference.

Organic. This is by far the most established eco-label and, not surprisingly, it received the most support. Many participants said they shopped at co-ops or natural food stores specifically because of the availability of organic foods. The perceived health benefits, such as avoiding synthetic pesticides, were among the most frequently stated motivations. Co-op members were more likely to cite pesticides' impacts on the environment, or effects on worker health, as additional considerations for purchasing organic. Some focus group participants went as far as saying their interest in the emerging eco-labels below would be contingent on requiring organic standards as well.

Humane. This label was similar to organic in

garnering broad support, with health concerns as a critical motivation. Avoiding hormones and antibiotics and reducing the risks of contracting infectious diseases were frequently mentioned as reasons for purchasing humane animal products. Concern for the animals themselves was also expressed and frequently paired with a critique of dominant production practices in the U.S. Interestingly, in our previous research (a nationally representative survey in 2006), those who frequently purchase organic and/or consider the environment when making purchases were more likely to prefer "humane."

Local. The availability of local foods was mentioned almost as frequently as organic as a reason for choosing co-ops or natural food stores. The motivations for interest in local foods were quite diverse and included nutrition, taste, supporting local farmers/communities, and reducing fossil fuel consumption. Co-op members were more likely to state environmental motivations for supporting local than natural food store shoppers. The definition of local is not consistent, but we defined it as produced within the state borders. Focus group participants also expressed interest in food sourced from closer proximity, regardless of political boundaries.

Domestic Fair Trade. Co-op members and natural food store shoppers demonstrated the strongest differences of opinion on this label. While natural food store shoppers were somewhat supportive of international fair trade, they were much less interested in a domestic counterpart. Co-op members, on the other hand, indicated almost unanimous support, and most expressed more

interest in this issue than in the concept of local. One co-op member said, “We need fair trade here in the United States, too! So I’m glad to see this. I would definitely buy something with this label.” Co-op members expressed greater awareness of the social justice issues facing farmers and farmworkers in the U.S., which may account for the divergence.

Pasture-raised. Motivations that were frequently mentioned in conjunction with this label were the potential health benefits, such as reduced fat, higher nutrient density (such as increased levels of Omega-3 fatty acids), and reduced risk of *E. coli* O157:H7. Concern for the well-being of the animals was also frequently discussed. Some participants said that pasture-raised criteria might be preferable if they allowed more freedom of movement than humane criteria, while others worried pasture-raised criteria might not address humane treatment specifically enough.

Integrated Pest Management. Nearly all participants viewed this criterion as inferior to organic. Some saw it as “organic light” but would be likely to buy food with this label if organic was not available, or in some cases, if it were cheaper than organic. Many participants expressed the hope that support for integrated pest management could assist farmers to transition to organic and eventually avoid the use of synthetic pesticides altogether.

Family Farmed. While the words “family farmed” initially evoked positive reactions from focus group participants, further discussion brought out some skepticism. All of the groups mentioned examples of families that had less than ideal characteristics (e.g., “the Manson Family”) or concern that it could apply to very large-scale operations.

Trust in types of certification

Most participants saw third-party certification of eco-labels as the best model, but the implementation of this scheme with respect to organic was not always fully trusted. Co-op members were more likely to express doubts about the integrity of the USDA organic standards and certification when compared to natural food store shoppers. One co-op member, for example, said, “...Huge corporations are starting to grab that—U.S. Organic label. I’m so

skeptical now.” In contrast, both groups expressed a high degree of trust in retailers. Co-op members indicated greater levels of trust in their retail store and, in addition, had more confidence in farmers when purchasing directly from them.

Co-op members were also much more supportive of an alternative to third-party certification than natural food store shoppers. When discussing the example of Certified Naturally Grown—a grassroots, peer-certified label that uses the USDA organic standards as a baseline—most (although not all) co-op members expressed a willingness to buy such products. Co-op members indicated more awareness and concern regarding the complexity/costs of certification for small operations, which may partially explain this support.

Implications for co-ops

Member-owners frequently said they shop at cooperatives because these stores offer products that are difficult to find in other retail outlets. Just as important, however, they rely on co-ops to filter out products that are not compatible with their interests (choice-editing). Co-op members place a high degree of trust in co-op staff to ensure that store product offerings are aligned with their values. Our research suggests these values include health/nutrition but also more altruistic goals such as ecological sustainability and equity. With respect to emerging eco-label criteria, the co-op members we talked to were most interested in humane, domestic fair trade, and local.

Co-op members also indicated a greater willingness to support an alternative form of certification oriented toward small-scale food producers. These members trust the retailer to help ensure that the integrity of the claims is maintained. Some emerging eco-labels, such as those focusing on local origin and domestic fair trade criteria, do not currently involve third-party certification. Food co-ops are likely to serve as the most promising initial markets for these efforts. Co-op support of these efforts, in turn, may serve as a point of distinction from other types of retailers and reinforce the loyalty of their member-owners who express broad food system concerns. ■

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