

'Green' stamps

Northwest industries are recognizing the branding power of going green.

BY ALAN DURNING

Spring is in the air, and thoughts are turning to — vegetables. Recently, a number of my colleagues have begun to order weekly boxes of certified organic produce from a small outfit called Pioneer Organics. They like the convenience (Pioneer delivers to your home), freshness and variety (from kiwis to parsnips, often locally grown), and nifty marketing tricks (sign someone else up and get a free box).

Above all, they like the chance to support environmentally sound agricultural practices in a way that fits with their busy lives.

Is this attraction to an “environmentally certified” product more a sign of the times or a sign of us?

If you've scanned my bio below and noticed that I head up Northwest Environment Watch, you might believe the latter. But I'd argue the former. Environmental certification, once irrelevant outside of tiny niche markets, is becoming

a huge branding concern for several Northwest business sectors. People from farmers to loggers, manufacturers to suppliers, are getting in on the act.

The key here is certification — independent, third-party verification that a product was made without undue harm to nature. Once certified, products get stickered with an array of “green labels” — Good Housekeeping seals for the globally conscientious.

Organic food is the veteran green label as well as the growth star of agriculture, with a decade of annual sales increases of more than 20% nationwide. The environmental benefits are enormous. Farming is among the Northwest's biggest

contributors to water pollution and salmon-stream disruption, but as certified organic growing increases, the region's fields are left undisturbed by thousands of pounds of pesticides and chemical fertilizer each year.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's adoption of a national organic standard in December 2000 may convince even more growers to go organic by making certification easier for farmers and consumers to understand.

In timber, the Forest Stewardship Council has developed rigorous standards by which it evaluates logging practices. Companies meeting them receive the FSC label, now a globally respected mark of environmental friendliness. Portland's own Collins Pine was the first in the world to gain FSC certification.

The label got a huge boost in 1999, when Home Depot pledged to sell only council-certified lumber. Over the past two years, that pledge, joined by European buyers' groups, Kinko's and others, increased sevenfold the market for certified woods. Although many timber companies, such as forest giant Weyerhaeuser, still opt for less stringent standards, Home Depot's commitment may, over time, lead others to the council's label.

A saltwater equivalent of the FSC, the Marine Stewardship Council is writing rules for sustainable fisheries.

Last fall, Alaska's closely monitored salmon fishery became the first U.S. fishery (and the world's second) to gain that seal of approval. Fishers hope the label will buy them access to certification-friendly markets, especially in Europe.

Builders are developing green certification as well. The cities of Portland and Seattle both recently approved policies that mandate new or newly remodeled city properties to follow the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standard for nonresidential buildings.

Meanwhile, renewable energy producers are using certification to steer the creation of new power sources. A dozen



Northwest utilities offer customers the option of paying a premium for certified energy. Large users influence how utilities plan investment for new power sources; a large contract for renewable energy can translate into wind turbines or solar generators in place of an oil, gas or hydroelectric power plant.

Certification isn't a substitute for regulations, of course, but it's a powerful addition. Legislative bodies are too narrowly divided to agree on dramatic changes in environmental standards in the immediate future. But that doesn't make complacency about environmental performance an acceptable business strategy. Certification gives consumers the information they need to make conscientious choices. And, if anything, certifiers are tougher on laggards than government regulators are.

Astute business leaders, it's said, spend most of their time studying their customers. Well, this spring, many customers in the Northwest are taking a closer look than ever at greens — not just organic vegetables, but labels. Take a moment to consider how you might cash in. **OBM**

Alan Durning is executive director of Northwest Environment Watch (NEW), a Seattle-based research and communications center that monitors the relationship between environment and economy and identifies high-leverage ways to improve it. NEW's latest project is This Place on Earth 2001: Guide to a Sustainable Northwest, which is available from www.northwestwatch.org.

If you're interested in writing a First Person essay, e-mail gillian@oregonbusiness.com.

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