

## **Sacred Foods Secular Certification Research Introduction**

One way that congregations can make positive change in the food and agricultural system is by the kinds of foods they choose for themselves and their institutions. With this in mind, the Certification Committee of the Sacred Foods Project researched food certification programs that specifically address issues encompassed by the Sacred Foods Eight Dimensions (available on our website: [www.sacred-foods.org](http://www.sacred-foods.org)). The result is the attached report with its quick scan chart with detailed explanations below on how each program addresses the Dimensions.

In selecting which certification programs to include, we used several criteria. First, we focused on certification programs that identify products in a way that is evident to the final consumer. Second, we selected certification programs that are multi-regional or national in scope. That means that we did not include certifications that might be very good if they were operating only in one city, or one that an industry might use prior to a product coming to market if the consumer would have no way of knowing about it. Finally, we did not look at certifications that addressed issues that are only tangentially related to our Sacred Foods Dimensions, even if they were professionally managed processes that otherwise had merit. For example, the National Heart Association “Heart Healthy” certification was not included.

Our final list includes national and some regional groups that we deemed relevant based on a review of their web sites and our professional knowledge of their programs. We did not do a third party audit of their systems and processes, and we do not hold this document out as an endorsement of their work, but rather as an analysis of how their self-description relates to the Sacred Food Dimensions.

We encourage congregations and religious institutions to use this document as a foundation for discussion and analysis of these and other programs. As with all organizational decisions, reaching communal consensus on whether and how to use information is the strongest foundation for a change in direction.

We recognize that for many, doing additional research on secular certifiers will not be feasible, given your time and resource constraints. We hope that the following information is useful to you in its current form for making more informed decisions about your organizational food purchasing.

If you do choose to do further research into these programs, here are some questions we thought that you as congregations and religious institutions (as opposed to scientists, academics and agricultural professionals) may want to explore:

1. How well does a given certification program's standards address the issues that are important to the congregation?
2. Are there "unintended" consequences that need to be considered? For example:
  - A. Increasing wages and benefits for farm workers increases the cost of produce and results in lost jobs. Large-scale buyers often shift to foreign suppliers with lower labor, operating and regulatory costs. For example, tomato sales from the Immokalee area of Florida fell 60% in the 90's as a result of post NAFTA Mexican imports.
  - B. Low prices result from overproduction. Fair-trade premiums may actually act as a subsidy to encourage more producers to enter the market. This may drive down the price of non-Fair-trade products even further, making non-Fair-trade farmers poorer. It may also limit the money that goes to the lower echelon of large-scale employers that are often prohibited from using the Fair-trade designation.
  - C. Local foods may be less energy-efficient to produce and ship without any economies of scale and may take business away from those in developing countries.
  - D. Organic certification rules allow the use of naturally occurring compounds to be used as pesticides, but forbids most synthetics. In tree fruit production, some organic growers use significant amounts of sulphur to control pests though its toxicity to mammals can be higher than some synthetics.
3. Are the standards actually enforced? How well? What are the standards for auditing and how frequently do audits take place? What are the standards for training and supervising the auditors? How do you evaluate non-numerical standards?
4. Are the standards "scientifically" based, "ethically" based or "anthropomorphically" based? Of what importance is this to you and your community? A "scientific" standard is based on publishable research across a wide range of disciplines that usually results in some sort of scientific consensus. An ethical proposition is based on standards that the community uses to judge other situations. It relies on reasoned analysis and evaluation of differing points of view to come to an informed judgment. An "anthropomorphic" standard speaks to actions or procedures that are not scientifically proven to be unpleasant for animals, but make us uncomfortable because we imagine that what would be unpleasant for humans would be unpleasant for animals.