

Katie Johnson: 'Food Justice' label could help local farmworkers

By Katie
Johnson

While local roadside stands and farmers markets have mostly closed up for the winter, the abundance of fruits and vegetables produced throughout the year in our region is unrivaled. California's Central Valley grows much of the fresh food eaten by people in America on any given day, from strawberries to almonds, onions to kale, peaches to tomatoes. This food supports the health of our entire country.

But what about the health of those who grow it? The reality is that too many farmworkers today face barriers to good health, whether from hazards on the job or from financial insecurity.

Agriculture is a way of life, not just a job, for many. And there are as many ways to farm as there are farmers. One constant, however, is the need for manual labor.

Even in the most mechanized operations, perishable food still needs real, live people to bring it to market. Many customers realize this and appreciate the importance of knowing where their food is grown, which has fueled the growth of farmers markets and roadside farm stands. This trend has been wonderful for those of us who sell produce at farmers markets, and great for ensuring that customers have easy access to healthy fruits and vegetables.

But it's equally important to remember the farmers we don't see or meet at these markets, many of whom work under difficult conditions for little money.

Farming can be dangerous, not just in terms of accidental injuries but also in terms of developing chronic health problems. Most farmworkers are not unionized, and most earn low wages. Many are employed only seasonally and might have little job security. Given the many problems farmworkers face, the most effective way to achieve fair working conditions could be by direct pressure from customers who are willing to say they want their food grown with fairness and respect.

A number of new labels are being developed to protect domestic farmworkers in much the same way the Fair Trade label protects the interests of international farmworkers. The Fair Trade seal aims to ensure basic living standards for farmers abroad, growing everything from bananas to coffee. The new labels would work to ensure the same for American farmworkers.

Two emerging labels include the Equitable Food Initiative's Trustmark, designed to certify fair treatment for workers and improved safety for workers and consumers, and the Food Justice Certified label, designed to certify social justice standards in agricultural systems.

The definition of what constitutes domestic fair trade can be debated, but many people agree that fair working conditions should include a living wage, minimal exposure to the most dangerous pesticides and safe handling practices for pesticides that are used, access to basic sanitary facilities and a workplace free from harassment or abuse.

Central Valley and foothill communities can be leaders in recognizing this new movement to benefit the people who feed us, because we know how valuable farmworkers are and what benefits they bring to our area. As consumers, we can pay attention not just to how healthy food is for our families, but also to how healthy it is for our neighbors who work on farms and their families.

To learn more about the movement, visit the [Domestic Fair Trade Association](http://www.thedfta.org) at www.thedfta.org and the Equitable Food Initiative at www.equitablefood.org.

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