

Social Justice Labeling: From Field to Table



by Michael Sligh

(This piece is a talk given to the conferees of the 32nd National Pesticide Forum, Advancing Sustainable Communities: People, Pollinators, and Practices, held at Portland State University, Oregon, April 11-12, 2014.)

[Introduction by Brett Ramey. Good afternoon everyone. My name is Brett Ramey and I am on the board of directors of Beyond Pesticides, and very fortunate to be. I currently live up in Seattle and work at the School of Medicine in the Center for Equity Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Washington's School of Medicine. I am honored to introduce Michael Sligh. He is the founding member of the Rural Advancement Fund International (RAFI) USA, where he directs policy, research and education on agricultural best practices, biodiversity, biotechnology, organic, identity preservation, and other food justice related issues in the organization's Just Foods Program. Michael has been doing this work for more than 30 years, both domestically and internationally. He is also the founding chair of the USDA National Organic Standards Board, the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, and the National Organic Coalition. Especially relevant to today's talk, Michael helped found the Agriculture Justice Project (AJP) and the Domestic Fair Trade Association. He is a part-time family farmer in North Carolina. Please join me in welcoming Michael Sligh.]

Thank you very much. I am honored to be here. It's a little dangerous asking a southern boy to come preach at lunch time. We're a little slow to get started and a lot slower to finish up. I am honored to be here and I've been a big supporter of this idea of beyond pesticides for a long time and we've worked with Jay Feldman (Beyond Pesticides), Fred Kirschenmann (Aldo Leopold Center and Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture), George Kimbrell (Center for Food Safety), and many people here that we've worked with to try to build and nurture a Just Food Movement—one that can be good for workers, farmers, and for all of us. And, it can be good for the planet.

I think that we have to recognize that a couple of themes have come up this morning. Firstly, it's the impossible. In many ways, we're not supposed to be here and not supposed to make this progress. Secondly, I heard Kim Leval (Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides) talk this morning about the need to break down our silos and reach out across movements and across sectors, recognizing how important that is. That isolation is probably one of our most dangerous realities. We need to really reach out. And then I also heard that maybe part of what I am involved in

is preventive medicine. And so I was glad to know that, which made me feel good. So I'm going to give you a little history about a couple of projects you may not know about that I think this community needs to know about and to be a part of.

History

RAFI traces its roots back to the 1930s, when America was in a rural crisis mostly because of bad policies and bad practices. Eleanor Roosevelt and a number of dignitaries organized the National Sharecroppers Fund to address the abuses of farmers and workers who worked the land, but did not own the land. We've tried to follow in the tradition of working for justice, equity and sustainability in agriculture. It was clear to us that it's not enough to save a family farm, if you don't save them for something good and they are not able to make a living at it. They have to be able to find a connection with a consumer who wants to buy their product.

I think that there are two very powerful things all of us can do to change our food system and one of them is in our buying preferences. Every day, what we buy determines the future of our food system. What we're tapping into here is this growing hunger by

the informed public that wants to know not only where their food comes from, but who grew it, and how they grew it. But, also increasingly they want to know how the farmers and workers were treated in growing that food. That's a very important and powerful connection that we have an opportunity to tap into and help pull through the marketplace.

At RAFI, we look at three things in trying to think about how to change agriculture. We think about (i) the right practices, (ii) the markets that draw those practices and how to reward them, and of course, (iii) the policies that can encourage and support this direction. Organic is a good example of when those three factors are in alignment and take off. In other cases, for example with genetically engineered organisms (GMO), we have a lot of policy

Texas. We were lucky. My grandfather didn't believe in borrowing money to farm. There were those who avoided that crisis, but I thought I would take a short break from farming and go fix the policy problem. In West Texas, we thought the problem was that public policy was just plain ass backwards. We were encouraging farmers to do the wrong thing and we were penalizing them for doing the right thing. Here we were with these organic farmers, who were being penalized, and here was this other direction and we were just throwing money at it as fast as possible. So, I thought I'd just fix that and get right back to farming. I have a small farm on the side, but its more therapy then a money making activity.

I think it's important to realize that we're embedded in a very predatory food system. Farmers are pitted against the buyers and the

workers are pitted against the farmers, the buyers are pitted against the retailers, and consumers are pitted against the retailers. It's not predatory by accident. That is the issue that we're trying to address. People go to the grocery store and they say, "Well, I don't understand why the price of food keeps going up. Surely farmers are making money. What's the problem here?" An Auburn University graph that we've been following over the decades continually shows a disconnect between the farmer pay price and the price at the grocery store.



Michael Sligh shows the Auburn University Graph at the 32nd National Pesticide Forum in Portland, OR.

and a lot of practice, but no consumer support. That's in our favor because we are not choosing that. The more we don't choose something, the quicker it will go away, and the more we reward something, the more we can grow it.

I got into this because I was a family farmer in the 1970s during the Earl Butz era (Secretary of Agriculture under Presidents Nixon and Ford). We were all told to get big or get out, and if we weren't making any money, it was because we needed a bigger truck. The Green Revolution was going to solve it, and you just needed more pesticides and more fertilizer, and the sky was the limit. Prices were high and land was high. But, it turned out that it was a bubble. Just like the urban bubble we recently had, hundreds of thousands of small family farmers were put out of business. I, myself, did not drink the cool aid and had decided that maybe organic agriculture was the right thing to do. And, so when the foreclosures happened, it did not affect our farm or our family farm out in West

Policy to Protect Workers in Organic Certification

We thought we can grow organic and that will be the sane alternative to agribusiness. Many of us who gave the bloom of our youth to the development of organic think that we have much to be proud of there. That is the base that we need to build upon. One of the things that we could not get in the federal organic legislation, however, was language to protect the workers. We have language to protect the earthworms, bees, water, air and soil. In worldwide grassroots, organic has always been a holistic approach to agriculture, but it does include fairness and it does include the people.

Now, because our relationship with USDA has been a shotgun marriage, really from day one, we are in constant marriage counseling. And Jay has now earned his red badge of courage as a National Organic Standards Board member and we thank you for all of your extra lifts on this issue. Thank you very much. But just know, every administration has attempted to undermine the organic rule. They

do not want to manage it. It does require us to constantly defend the turf we have won. We cannot get complacent, we must continue to defend it, but we also have to grow the ethic. We have to add back the parts of organic that we were not able to do within the federal rule. In a rational world, we would have policies that address fairness at the national and international level. But, as we well know, we are not in a rational world at the moment.

Fairness in Organic

Working with four other really good and diverse organizations, in 1999 when the federal rule went through on organic, we recognized that we didn't get the fairness part in there, so we started working to add it on in the marketplace. We worked with Nelson Carrasquillo (CATA—Farmworkers Support Committee), Marty Mesh (Florida Organic Farmers and Consumers), Liz Henderson (Northeast Organic Farmers Association), and one of our partners in Bolivia (Indigenous Farmers Association) to add justice onto organic. What would it need to look like? What would be included in that? What are the problems that we are all facing as farmers and as workers and as buyers? What would those standards look like? So we decided to figure out what those standards should be. Let's go test them in the marketplace and see if we can add the standards into those farm operations willing to take the risk and stick their neck out.

We know some of the bigger macro background that has been a dynamic in establishing the important need to add justice on at this time. We know that in the federal law there is nothing that really addresses fair prices for farmers. We have some small organic dairies now going out of business in the northeast. That's not right. What are we doing wrong that organic dairies are going out of business? We also know that the market is concentrated. We also know that working conditions in general for farmworkers, processing workers, or even retail workers are left out of the organic standard. We know that we don't have public policy to support this. We know that there is growing interest on the part of consumers who want this. We also know that businesses want to differentiate in the market. I've got organic down, now what? What do I do now? I want a new challenge. We are hearing this, and these are all positive signs that we're trying to take advantage of.



The Good and the Bad

We have much to be proud of in organic. It's up to \$60 billion dollars in sales globally now. It was something that was supposed to be impossible. Fred, how many years in a row were we told that it was impossible? Would you just stop doing this? That is impossible, you can't do it. Well, here we are and we are doing it. We're also seeing continued growth in fair trade. Organic and fair trade are the two fastest growing parts of the agriculture sector worldwide. We are also seeing a number of ethical claims come into the market place. Looking at consumer studies, we're now seeing fair living wages for workers right up there with pollution reduction in terms of consumer attitudes toward their food.

We also continue to see a lot of very bad news about what is going on in agricultural labor in America. It's important to remember that the U.S. and China are the two major countries in the world that have not signed on to hardly any of the international labor treaties. Europe and many of the other parts of the world have signed on, and we don't even have it on the books. This idea of the farmers and the workers coming to us and saying that I hear

about all this fair trade coffee and all that's great, but what about here? What about fairness for workers here? What about fairness for farmers here? How do we bring fair trade home and what would it look like in a domestic setting? We have a very sophisticated marketplace here. Customer expectation is very, very high. We knew right off the bat, if we were to create something that could work here, it had to be sophisticated and it had to have the allowance to address the whole supply chain.

The other thing that we saw was missing—collectively, there was no watering hole. There was no place for businesses, workers, farmers and nonprofits to come together, sit down at a table as equals and say, "How do we do this?" How do we have domestic fair trade and what the heck is it? Many of us helped form the Domestic Fair Trade Association.

Our new executive director, Colette Cosner, is here with us today. The environmental community should know the Domestic Fair Trade Association. The organization is your ally. You should ask her how you can get involved and she should ask you how

she can get involved in your issues. We are of the same movement. We are from the same side of the river. The Domestic Fair Trade Association is really trying to do two things, much like what we have to do in organic. We're trying to promote domestic fair trade, but we're also trying to protect the integrity of fair trade.

Because the United States is the biggest market in the world for fair trade, we get all these products coming in from all over the world. All come with different standards, all with different claims.

We are also trying to parse out those claims in order to help educate consumers to make more informed choices. To the extent that consumers are informed, that's what you're going to be pulling through the marketplace. Just as you want to vote for certified organic in the marketplace, you want to vote for fair trade because it is making a difference in the lives of workers and farmers. I would suggest you go to the Domestic Fair Trade Association website. They are now in the process of evaluating market claims for fairness and will be doing that on an ongoing basis. Similar to what Consumers Union does for toasters, the Domestic Fair Trade Association is doing that for evaluating fair trade. This is a valuable contribution to our movement. (See the box above for some of the principles that Domestic Fair Trade Association is using to measure these different claims in the marketplace.) We obviously don't include GMOs, we are opposed to toxic chemicals, and we are in favor of family farming, and the rights of farmers and workers. We are your kind of people.

Integrating Social Values into the Marketplace

Focusing on three activities, we want to build community with the workers, the farmers, and the companies. We have all been told that we are each other's enemies. So we are trying to break down those barriers and have workers and farmers sitting with CEOs of progressive businesses. We want non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sitting there and talking about how we make this happen. How do we make the impossible happen, here in North America? We want to defend the principles and we also want to conduct consumer education. Some of the current members of the Association certainly want to grow this, just like everyone else.



Principles

1. Family Scale Farming	9. Long-Term Trade Relationships
2. Capacity Building for Producers and Workers	10. Sustainable Agriculture
3. Democratic, Participatory Ownership and Control	11. Appropriate Technology
4. Rights of Labor	12. Indigenous Peoples' Rights
5. Equality and Opportunity	13. Transparency and Accountability
6. Direct Trade	14. Education and Advocacy
7. Fair and Stable Pricing	15. Responsible Certification and Marketing
8. Shared Risk and Affordable Credit	16. Animal Welfare

Labeling

We also need some kind of label to inspire us in the marketplace. The Agriculture Justice Project (AJP), which is made up of farmworkers, farmers, advocates, and indigenous farm organizations went on this journey. We started in 1999 and we spent about six or seven years going to forums that we hosted around the world, bringing diverse stakeholders together. We were in Thailand, Australia, and Uruguay. We went all over listening to stakeholders tell us about their problems. Tell us what we need to do if we're going to make a label claim. What would it need to do to have validity for you? So we wanted something that would be internationally compatible, but would also be appropriate in a North American setting. Just

keep in mind, much like the pesticides issue, we don't have a lot on the books. What is on the books is not enforced very well. Sound familiar? Well, that's where we are in agricultural justice –not on the books and what's on the books not very well enforced. So, in developing standards, we had to cover all of that missing territory.

Listening Sessions

So we went all around listening to people we want to hear what was working and what was not working. What are the problems with fair trade? What are the problems with organic? What is missing that we need to add? Eventually, we went through six rounds of standard setting at the international level, where we kept refining and getting feedback. We came up with this body of standards that we now have taken into the marketplace. We have tested them and are now beginning to label in the North American market.

Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) Standards (The Promise)

- Farmers and all food system workers' rights to freedom of association
- Fair wages and benefits for workers
- Fair and equitable contracts for farmers and buyers
- Fair pricing for farmers
- Clear conflict resolution policies for farmers, workers, and buyers
- The rights of indigenous peoples (under development)
- Workplace health and safety and decent farmworker housing
- High quality training for farm intern and apprentices
- The rights and protection of children on farms
- Protection of the environment (organic and sustainable farming practices)

Obviously, it's important to be holistic. We even include standards for interns because we heard from a lot of interns on organic farms that they didn't feel exactly like they were learning what they were supposed to learn. Maybe it was just that they learned what end of the hoe to use, and that's good, but that's not exactly a full education if you're trying to intern to become an organic farmer. We didn't want to miss a lick. We want to cover the interns, children and farmers. But we also want to say that all of these people have responsibilities. It's not just about rights, it's also about responsibilities. So everybody has to have responsibilities.

Elements of Certification System

This is about shining a bright light on the darkest parts of our food system. We heard very loudly that we should not create a new certification system. For God's sake, we have plenty of certifiers, we have plenty of inspectors. Just train the ones' who are already doing organic inspection and just add it on. So that's the model that we have adopted. We are completely transparent. We have advisory groups, standards committees, and we publish it all. It's all on the website. We have our first agricultural justice, certified organic strawberry farm in California with 35 workers. We are working on the first agricultural justice certified food hub in New York City. We're working with a group of small organic farmers selling back to their food co-op in the northeast. We also do a great deal of education, because we realize that one of the biggest barriers that we learned in organic was that you need to build the runway to get the farmers to go there. They need tools to become an organic farmer. So, we're trying to develop a website approach, the tools that farm businesses and farm workers need to take this new direction, and do it more swiftly. We also have 75 farms in Canada that are organic grain farms that are now selling into 60 Whole Food stores across America with the AJP symbol. We are just at the beginning of this, so we are asking you to go to the bulk bins at Whole Foods and look

for the AJP label and buy some of it. By doing this, you are telling them that you think this is a good idea. This is how we grew organic. There was plenty of time where I had organic produce and I didn't have a place to sell it. We have to have a place to sell this. If we want to pull this through, we have to have a place to sell it. So we have the food co-ops, some restaurants, food hubs, and Whole Foods. They're willing to back this, but we have to have the customers go there. You also need to go to your favorite brand of organic and ask them why they are not adding social justice to their claim. There are a number of companies that have the perfect profile for this.

We know from a bigger picture point of view that just the marketplace alone will not be sufficient. We know that we have to address bigger issues like campaign finance reform. Jim Hightower tells us that if God wanted us to vote then he would have sent us candidates. And, Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government in the world, except for all the rest. But it should not be that democracy is the best democracy that money can buy. We know we have to address that issue if we're going to turn the ass backward progress back around.

I would just say in closing that farmworkers can't have justice if farmers don't have justice. And neither can have justice unless the enlightened self-interest of the rest of us supports that direction. I also would say, I do not believe we can have the shores of sustainability on environmental stewardship alone. We must have justice. That is the fuel that will drive this to the next generation. I don't think it's too late to get it right. If we can work together, we can make it so. Thank you.

You can view this talk and others from Advancing Sustainable Communities: People, pollinators and practices, the 32nd National Pesticide Forum on our YouTube Channel at bit.ly/YouTube32NPF.



Photo by Florida Organic Growers for Agricultural Justice Project, September, 2012 blog post by Leah Cohen, available at: www.foginfo.org/2012/09/03/departmental-spotlight-social-justice