

Innovative NonProfit Partnership Brings Sustainable Agriculture Certification to Pennsylvania
New Markets for Farmers • More Socially and Environmentally Responsible Products for Consumers

Since 1992, PASA has been a leading advocate for reconnecting farmers and consumers to improve human and environmental health, and we have recently begun a new project to create more transparency and accountability in our regional food system.

PASA has formed a partnership with the national nonprofit Food Alliance (www.foodalliance.org) to certify farmers, food packers, processors and distributors in Pennsylvania and surrounding states for sustainable agricultural and business practices.

Food Alliance certification standards address a wide range of consumer concerns for food products including: safe and fair working conditions, healthy and humane treatment of animals, reduction of pesticide use and toxicity, soil and water conservation and protection of wildlife habitat. The standards specifically prohibit genetically modified crops or livestock and the use of synthetic hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics. They require feeds for animals, not derived from other animals, with the exception of milk and milk by-products.

“For consumers to make free and informed choices about what kinds of foods support the health and well-being of our communities and the environment, they need a basis for evaluating marketing claims,” says PASA executive director Brian Snyder. “They may be able make to more informed decisions about local foods when they have met the farmer in the farmers market and had a conversation about how that farm was managed. That opportunity usually doesn’t exist in a retail or restaurant setting. We want to give our regional farmers a tool to differentiate their products in that retail or food service setting. And we want to give citizens a better means to separate the marketing of food from the reality of production practices.”

You can review Food Alliance’s existing certification standards at www.FoodAlliance.org. Farmers and ranchers can generally expect the certification process to take 4 to 8 weeks, depending on the season. The inspection will be scheduled when weather and the production cycle allow direct observation of management practices and outcomes.

One of the factors distinguishing Food Alliance’s program is that inspectors are required to have education and experience with the production systems they inspect. The inspection is not simply a checklist. It is about understanding how producers make management decisions, and what systems and practices they use to ensure good outcomes.

Hearst Ranch Beef in California was certified by Food Alliance in 2006. Manager Brian Kenny had this to say about the experience. “What I like about Food Alliance certification is the very pragmatic approach to continually improving your operation. You get to look in the mirror and honestly assess what you’re doing. The questions the inspector was asking were questions we should have been asking ourselves anyway. We did find some points for improvement during the inspection, and it turned out they were things that actually helped us with efficiency, too. The inspection also helped us see and appreciate all the good things we were doing, which has given us more to talk about with our customers.”

Food Alliance launched its farm and ranch certification program in 1998 in Portland, Oregon with a single apple grower selling in three grocery stores. Today, there are over 320 Food Alliance certified farms and ranches in 23 U.S. states, Canada and Mexico. These producers manage over 5.6 million acres, raising beef, lamb, pork, dairy, mushrooms, wheat, legumes, and a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

Food Alliance introduced certification for processors and distributors in 2006, and has since certified 6 distribution facilities and 14 fruit, vegetable, dairy and meat processors.

To increase demand for certified products and to support the success of certified farms and ranches, Food Alliance also forges relationships with a wide variety of commercial food buyers. These “partners in change” include grocery stores, restaurant chains and food service companies – and involve local, regional and national businesses.

With cumulative sales of Food Alliance certified products exceeding \$450 million per year, certified farmers and ranchers report positive customer feedback, increased customer loyalty, new markets, as well as increased sales, access to contracts and price premiums.

To fulfill its educational mission, Food Alliance has also commissioned groundbreaking research on consumer attitudes towards sustainable food products (The Hartman Reports), organized 2 national conferences on eco-labeling, and published a popular guide for universities, hospitals and other institutions on developing sustainable food purchasing policies.

Food Alliance maintains its headquarters in Portland, Oregon, and has regional offices in Davis, California, and St. Paul, Minnesota, and now with PASA, an outpost in the Mid-Atlantic region as well.

“A growing number of companies are marketing ‘natural’ or ‘green’ products – but when you look closely, there’s not much behind it,” says Food Alliance executive director Scott Exo. “Consumers know that game and they are increasingly cynical. Third-party certification verifies and substantiates marketing claims. There is an objective and meaningful standard for performance. There is a credible inspection process to ensure the standard has been met. With third-party certification, you know where the product comes from and you know how it was produced. That transparency creates trust and loyalty.”

PASA’s role in bringing Food Alliance certification to Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic region is to focus on marketing the program and helping, where necessary, to facilitate the initial process for farmers and businesses in achieving certification. Also, PASA’s regional marketing offices, and the networks of farmers, consumers and food-related businesses they have developed, provide ideal circumstances for expansion of the program and maximizing the impact on the viability of farms, health of the food system and economic development in communities, all in a measurable way. For more information, please contact us at certification@pasafarming.org, or call our main office at (814) 349-9856.