

The Organic Market in the Four Corners States: Opportunities for Growth



Overview

Certified organic producers in the Four Corners States of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah want to be part of healthy food enterprises that benefit local (within the respective state) and regional (include neighboring states) economies; these producers are willing to work together in order to make this happen. But connecting the links in the organic marketing chain across the wide-open spaces that separate producers and consumers in this region has not been easy.

This project grew from a desire on the part of organic industry members, educational and governmental institutions, and non-profit organizations to foster the development of a strong market for organic products in the Four Corners States. The project provides a better understanding of the opportunities for and barriers to a larger, more vibrant organic food market in the Four Corners States. This report has been made readily available to a wide variety of individuals, including policymakers, industry members, educators, and members of non-profit organizations that promote the concepts and practice of sustainable and organic production of agricultural products. Understanding the organic market, including the demand for and supply of organic products in the Four Corners States, was accomplished through a four-stage research program consisting of: a comprehensive literature search; a survey of the certified organic producers for 2005 from the Four Corners States; a series of interviews with experts in the four states; and three carefully selected case studies of notable businesses.

Project Objectives

- A better understanding of current and potential regional organic markets through comprehensive market supply analysis
- Identify specific market opportunities, and solutions for producers to overcome market barriers
- Relay the findings to producers, extension agents, industry members and non-profit organizations



Organic Producer Survey

Survey data were collected from 141 of the 285 certified organic producers in the Four Corners States of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah

Demographic Information About Survey Respondents

- 78 percent men and 22 percent women
- Average age: 51
- Average number of years classified as certified organic: 7
- 59 percent consider their business a “Family farm or ranch”
- 35 percent consider their business a “Family partnership or corporation”
- 12 percent attribute some of their sales to agritourism activities

Highlights of Case Studies

This report contains three case studies chosen to highlight some interesting and creative ways in which local organic agricultural businesses are operating within the region.

- An innovative regional distribution network initiated by a partnership between a successful natural foods cooperative and a regional producer group.
- A regional consumer owned distribution cooperative, serving the entire Four Corners States region, which specializes in natural and organic products.
- A newly built, family-run, small-scale, certified organic meat processing plant.



Key Findings

- The demand for local, organic products is expected to continue to exceed supply.
- Organic producers are committed to their organic investments.
- Most producers plan to maintain or expand their certified organic acreage in the next five years.
- Over 60 percent of the producers sell all of their products within the region (Four Corners States and neighboring states).
- Organic producers are looking for ways to increase their local sales.
- Producers want to play a role in strengthening processing and distribution sectors.
- 25 percent of producers are selling through the natural food store market outlet.
- 75 percent of producers want to enter the natural food store market or increase their sales in the market in the next five years.
- Collaborative, producer-involved marketing initiatives, transportation networks and processing facilities are priorities for regional improvements.

Recommendations

- Enhance education about market opportunities and certification requirements.
- Develop a regional business incubator and innovation center.
- Increase assistance for local direct marketing.
- Increase assistance for producer certification expenses.
- Establish a regional conference focused on marketing and distribution.
- Target research on processing and distribution.
- Promote policy improvements supporting production and marketing.



Conclusion

This report comes at a critical point for organic agriculture in the Four Corners States. The importance of consuming locally produced agricultural products is growing, and consumer demand for certified organic products is at an all-time high. A growing number of conventional retail outlets, including chain supermarkets and restaurants, are choosing to offer organic products to their consumers.

The information gathered through this project identifies strategies that will assist the regional certified organic market to grow and develop into its full potential.

Complete data from the research conducted in 2006, the survey and results, and case studies along with the recommendations and opinions of regional experts in organic agriculture are available at: <http://www.swmarketingnetwork.org>.

The project was a collaborative effort among many institutions, organizations, and individuals in the Four Corners States of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah.

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Many other groups in the region also provided input into this project.



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