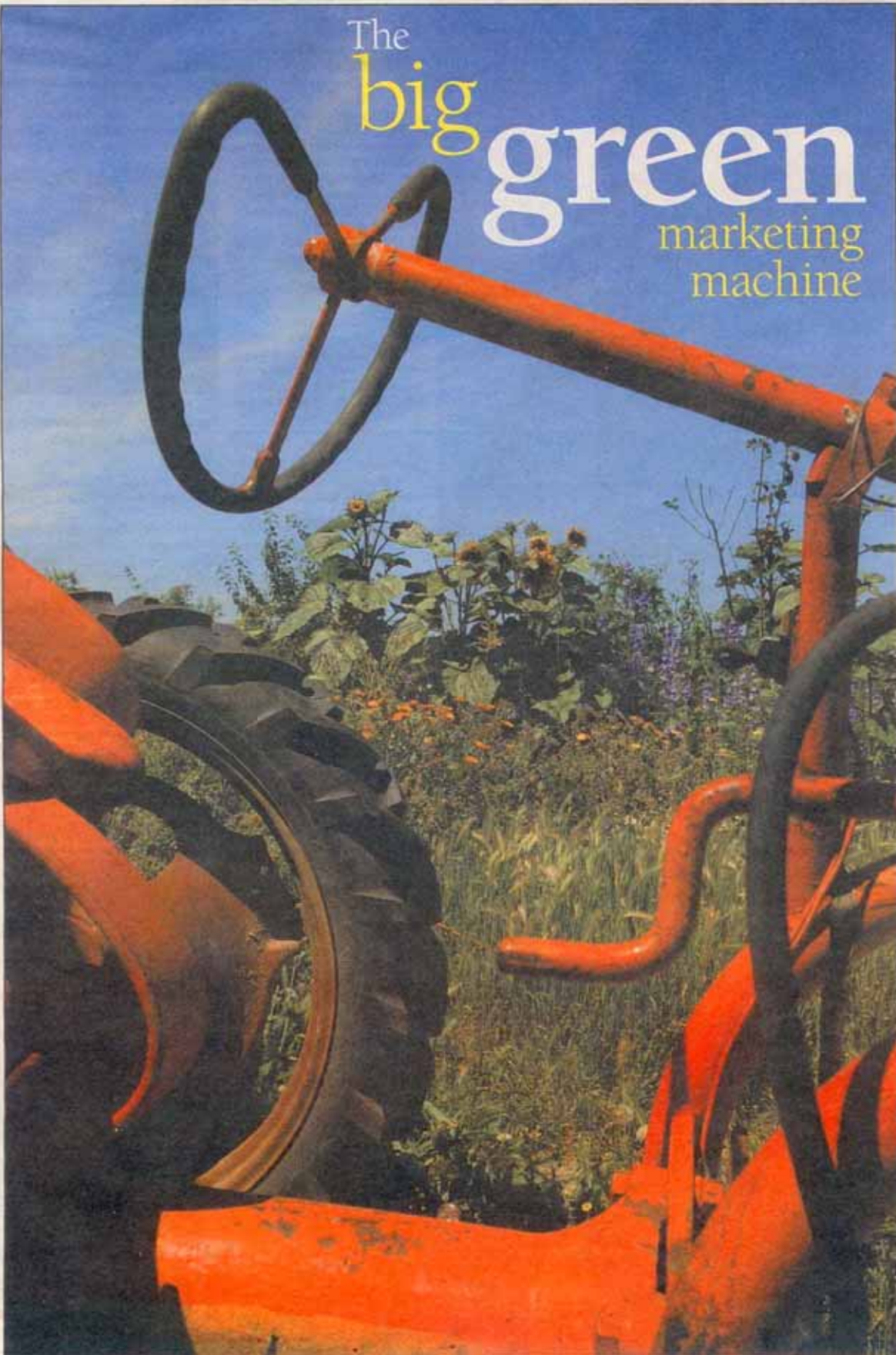


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## Eco-friendly branding nabs market share

By **DEIRDRE GREGG**  
STAFF WRITER

For the discriminating environmentalists, it's not enough that the food on your plate be merely organic.

The truly eco-friendly meal also is locally produced and grown on a family-owned farm using methods that protect streams and waterways. Or it can be the product of no-till farming, a generally nonorganic alternative that helps to preserve soil quality and reduce erosion.

As consumers' interest in environmentally friendly products has grown, so has producers' interest in marketing their products that way.

But, because most people have jobs other than researching the history of every arugula leaf they eat, many consumers turn to third-party, independently verified standards or certifications.

In the Northwest, where many customers opt for eco-friendly choices, there is a plethora of labels.

The most prevalent certification is U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified organic. Organic farm sales in Washington were more than \$101 million in 2006, up 32 percent from 2005, while acreage grew by 40 percent, according to Washington State University research.

But other labeling programs are growing.

The Portland-based Food Alliance has certified 270 farms and ranches on the basis of sustainable practices and social responsibility, such as safe and fair working conditions for employees. About 40 Puget Sound producers are certified by the Salmon Safe program, which protects water quality and habitat and includes other environmental practices, such as water conservation. Meanwhile, a dozen farmers are part of the Shepherd's Grain program, which markets products grown using no-till agriculture.

The certification process for foods parallels similar steps in other parts of the environmental movement.

"Green" buildings, which help conserve energy and use environmentally friendly materials, are certified through processes such as the LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council.

In one of the newest areas of environmental business, a coalition of big banks is proposing setting new standards

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for carbon trading and voluntary carbon offsets. With carbon offsets, an individual can buy "credits" for steps such as planting trees, which are intended to absorb enough greenhouse gases to cancel out all or part of the greenhouse gases emitted by that individual's activities. Some major financial services companies are pushing for regulation of that market in order to boost consumer confidence and make sure offset projects are effective.

Terry Heckler, a branding expert in Seattle, said it can be difficult for consumers to distinguish between a company's genuine commitment to environmentalism and "greenwashing" — taking minimal eco-friendly steps and trumpeting them loudly for marketing purposes.

"People do a lot of talk, but very few walk," he said.

That's where certification programs — and educated consumers — come in.

For most farmers, of course, the interest in sustainable farming has more to do with their own environmental ethos than potential customers. But as the interest in sustainable food production has grown, they are seeing their practices become a potent marketing tool.

"Ultimately your food dollar is the most important tool a consumer has," said Andrew Stout, the owner of Carnation-based Full Circle Farm.

Stout said many customers recognize the USDA organic certification, and it creates transparency throughout the system.

"It's a fair evaluation process that doesn't favor marketing spin factors, because you've got integrity in the certification process," he said.

Stout said when he heard about the Salmon Safe certification — the idea of using the market to reward farmers who are good stewards of the land — it fit with his own beliefs about sustainability.

Full Circle was already taking many of the steps required for Salmon Safe certifications. But to get the certification, the farm added a few necessary measures, such as putting in a fish screen and improving irrigation practices — things that were better for the farm's operation, as well.

Stout also looked at the Food Alliance program, but decided not to participate in that program yet.

"The way we looked at it, you can be over-certified," he said. "It's tough as a consumer when you go and you're associated with too many choices ... you can hang five labels on (a product), and it's a

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BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTOS/DAN SCHLATTER  
Full Circle Farm owner Andrew Stout shows off red cabbage plants.



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Above, Anabel Valdez separates lettuce before it is washed, spun dry and boxed. Below, celery starts to grow in one of Full Circle Farm's five greenhouses.

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little bit much sometimes."

Farmers say that consumers have become far more sophisticated about organic labeling.

"The question used to be 'Are you growing organically?'" said Jeff Miller, owner of Monroe-based Willie Greens Organic Farm. "Now the question is 'Are you certified organic?' That tells me they're becoming more educated."

Even relatively new labels such as Salmon Safe are gaining recognition. A 2006 survey of 500 Oregon consumers found that 30 percent of food shoppers recognized the Salmon Safe label, said Larry Nussbaum, program director for Stewardship Partners, which runs Washington's Salmon Safe program. And *Vanity Fair's* recent green issue listed Salmon Safe as one of the five most reliable labels.

Fred Fleming and Karl Kupers, who launched the Shepherd's Grain label to promote no-till farming, are not just producing the product but marketing the benefits of the production method.

No-till agriculture is a type of farming that requires little or no disturbing of the soil through digging. The method helps to reduce erosion, keep healthy microbes and worms intact, and lock up carbon in the soil rather than releasing it in the atmosphere as a greenhouse gas. Most no-till methods used today are not organic, although researchers are searching for a way to combine the two.

Since Fleming and Kupers brought the first Shepherd's Grain product on line in 2002, 12 farmers have joined the program. The flour is now used by bakeries and restaurants including a Zip's Drive-in in Spokane and Kidd Valley locations at Safeco Field and Qwest Field in Seattle.

"Karl and I go out and tell our stories and recruit food activists," Fleming said. "Then they become ambassadors to save the family farm."

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