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## **Consumers eager to know more about the environmental and social impacts of the food they buy, survey finds**

Here's a heads-up for farmers and food retailers: Consumers have a strong desire to know more about the origins and safety of the food they buy, and they'd like to get the information when they make their purchases.

That's the word from researchers at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who surveyed consumers to find out what people want to know about their food and what factors would influence their purchasing decisions.

Food safety topped the list of consumer concerns, perhaps not surprisingly following headlines about mad cow disease and recurrent outbreaks of food contaminated with e. coli bacteria. Consumers also want to know more about the nutritional value of their food, the treatment of animals in food production, environmental impacts--including pesticides and genetic engineering--of food production, and the working conditions of people who labor in the food industry.

"Our goal was to give consumers a voice they might not have, and the first step was to find out what they want to know," said Phil Howard, a second-year postdoctoral researcher at UCSC's Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS), who conducted the survey with postgraduate researcher Jan Perez. "Food retailers, processors, and growers should all start looking closely at these issues because people are interested in supporting them through their purchases. Broadly speaking, ethical consumerism is an emerging force, and people on the Central Coast appear eager to make more informed purchases."

Howard and Perez conducted five focus groups and mailed a 26-question survey to more than 1,000 randomly selected households in San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Benito, and Monterey Counties; the survey response rate was 48 percent. The survey was funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant to foster sustainable agriculture on the Central Coast.

From Salinas to Silicon Valley, consumers voiced a strong interest in learning more about their food. Consumers expressed interest in knowing more about the wages food workers receive, the influence of large corporations, and how far food travels before it is sold.

More than 80 percent of survey respondents endorsed the idea of food labels as a source of the information they're seeking, said Howard.

"Product labels and brochures or retail displays were the most popular sources of information," said Howard, noting that newspapers, magazines, books, and the web were selected by about half

of respondents. “People really want the information when they're making their purchasing decisions.”

In some parts of Europe, Howard noted, meat is packaged with bar codes and stores are outfitted with computer terminals that allow consumers to scan the product and call up profiles of the farm where the food was produced. “Europeans are more committed to the idea of ethical consumption, and regional and local labels are a lot more prevalent there,” said Howard. “The fair-trade movement began in Europe and is already changing the production practices of products like coffee and bananas.”

Citing the growing popularity of seals or logos that signify food meets certain standards, such as the USDA's “organic” food label, survey respondents were asked to rank five potential “eco-labels,” defined as follows:

- o Humane--meat, dairy products, or eggs from animals that haven't been treated cruelly
- o Locally grown--grown within 50 miles of point of purchase
- o Living wage--provides above-poverty wages to workers involved in producing the food
- o U. S. grown--grown in the United States
- o Small-scale--supports small farms or businesses

Respondents were most enthusiastic about the idea of a “humane” label, with more than 30 percent citing it as their first choice, followed by locally grown (22 percent), living wage (16.5 percent), U.S. grown (5.9 percent), and small-scale (5.2 percent). “Humane treatment of animals was a very emotional topic in the focus groups--it came up in all of them,” said Howard. In the survey, respondents were asked to choose only one standard from different combinations, but Howard noted that most people found that “very difficult”; many respondents said they would prefer one label that represented all of the standards.

“People are interested in buying food that is fresh and that they trust because they know where it came from,” said Howard. “Consumers like the idea of supporting the local economy, and they want to support family farms, which have a strong emotional appeal to a lot of people.”

In a separate question, consumers showed a strong willingness to pay a “price premium” for strawberries that would guarantee a living wage and safe working conditions for farmworkers. Eighty-four percent of respondents said they were willing to pay a 5 cent--or 3 percent--price premium on a \$1.50 pint of strawberries for the assurance the standards were being met. The median price premium people were willing to pay was \$1.06 per pint, or 71 percent above the regular price. Given that strawberry pickers typically earn 10.5 to 12.5 cents per pint, a 5-cent-per-pint price premium could fund a 40 percent increase in piece rate pay, said Howard.

“People being surveyed tend to express a greater willingness to pay than they actually support in the marketplace, but these results show the potential level of support for a price premium,” said Howard.