

Farms agriculture

Local Farming's GROWING PAINS AND GAINS

Competition from imports hurts many local farms

by Chela Zabin

IF you're like most Americans, you've become more aware of your diet in recent years. You've cut down on red meat and sugar, and you've increased the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables you eat. And if you're like most Santa Cruzans, you probably think that with all the Brussels sprout and artichoke fields nearby, you're getting lots of local, farm-fresh produce.

What's more likely, especially during the winter, is that 80 percent of what's in your vegetable bin is grown hundreds of miles from here — most of it in Mexico and Chile. And while the imports have made more food available to us year round, the produce from those countries contains hidden costs to the consumer and to the local growers, food industry workers and food processors.

Of particular concern to the consumer are the lax inspections at the Mexican-U.S. border, where most South and Central American produce enters the country.

In an audit of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's inspection program in 1985, the federal General Accounting Office found that less than 1 percent of imports were inspected for pesticide residues. Of those checked, the FDA found that 6 percent of the samples exceeded the allowable amounts of pesticide residue or contained residues of chemicals banned as too dangerous for use in the United States.

Even worse, 45 percent of the batches found to be contaminated were not recovered — by the time the FDA had completed its tests, the produce was already in grocery stores

across the state. The GAO also found that the FDA often didn't take punitive measures against growers violating the law and didn't follow up on those it did fine.

While Congress is currently considering a number of bills that would improve the border inspections, action has not yet been taken.

How great a health risk this represents is open to question. At the time of the audit, FDA officials claimed that the residues didn't pose a significant health problem to the American public, and the GAO didn't challenge that assertion.

GAO officials did, however, warn

the public not to extrapolate from its findings, since its review was limited to only to certain countries and to different-sized samples that might skew the percentage higher or lower.

Environmentalists and consumer groups think that the GAO's findings are just the tip of the asparagus, so to speak. More recent individual investigations have found a much higher percentage of illegal pesticides, specifically on imported tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, Brussels sprouts, mangoes and several different types of berries.

Furthermore, the groups claim that the agency only tests for a limited

number of pesticides. They challenge the concept of "safe limits" for residues and say that the cumulative effects of different types of pesticides have not been studied.

"Of course there are the classic cases of pesticide poisoning, like the watermelons a few years back," said Brock deLappe, coordinator of the trace organics facility at UCSC's Long Marine Lab. "But those are cases of acute toxicity. There's also chronic sublethal levels which can inhibit the immune system and lead to secondary-type diseases."

While recent reports have raised questions about the safety of pesti-

cide use on domestically grown produce as well, the fact remains that inspections of domestic crops are much more thorough.

"Any time a grower gets ready to spray here, he's got to file a permit with the ag (county agricultural) commissioner," said Thomas Am Rhein, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. "There's about 500 regulations regarding the use of pesticides we've got to comply with."

"A food processor isn't allowed to use any carcinogenic chemical on food that's going to be frozen or processed in any way," said Richard Shaw, president of Richard A. Shaw, Inc., a frozen food business in Watsonville. Since most of the importer countries have fewer restrictions on pesticide use, there's no way of guaranteeing processed food grown elsewhere has met those standards, he said.

According to Shaw and a number of local growers, the difference in pesticide requirements becomes a financial advantage for foreign and multinational growers, who already have an edge on domestic farmers because of cheaper overhead, low labor costs and government subsidies.

While Santa Cruz farmers often have to use more expensive, less toxic chemicals and keep their workers away from freshly sprayed fields, foreign growers are free to buy the cheaper, more toxic chemicals and face fewer rules about how to apply them.

"It's really no good for anybody," said Shaw. "Not for the consumer, the American grower or the farm hands who work over there."

Competition from imports may have played a part in a few Santa Cruz County farmers going out of business in recent years, according to Am Rhein and Steve Siri, a miniature carnation grower. Other farmers switch to whatever seems to be a profitable crop in a given season, which eventually leads to an overproduced and depressed domestic market for that crop, they said.

Shaw blames imports for most of the now-closed Watsonville Canning's troubles and said his company has suffered as a result of rising costs



In the broccoli: Richard Shaw of Watsonville

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Imports

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and a market price the imports keep artificially low. Mostly, he said, it's the smaller farmer or business that gets hurt.

"In 1945, I used to sell a pound of broccoli spears for 45 cents. Wages were about 50 cents an hour then. Now I sell that pound for 60 cents, but wages here start at \$5.85 an hour," he said.

Shaw said that he is not opposed to imports and wouldn't want to see severe tariffs placed on importers. But he doesn't think it's fair that foreign growers are exempt from the regulations he and other domestic businesses face.

He thinks if people were aware of the consequences of buying foreign-grown produce they'd buy American, although most produce, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, isn't labeled. So last year he helped form an educational organization to promote domestic produce to consumers and farm groups — T.H.A.N.K.S., Inc. (Together Helping Americans Nationwide Keep Strong).

Currently run by one paid staffer and a handful of volunteers, the organization's first step has been to encourage domestic growers to use its logo, a farmer on a tractor in front of a half-circle, and the word "T.H.A.N.K.S." on their produce so that consumers will know it is domestically grown. A number of growers and distributors throughout the country have begun using the label, he said.

"Of course I'm trying to save my business," said Shaw. "But if worse comes to worse, and I close down, I won't starve. I'll find some work somewhere. But I employ a thousand people. Where are they going to go? That becomes the community's problem. So people need to know about this. And Dick Shaw isn't going to go down without a fight." •