



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Amador Mesa, now a Teamster, picks organic lettuce at Riverside Farms.

# Watsonville organic farm <sup>from</sup> proves fertile soil for union 7-2-95

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WATSONVILLE — The union contract signed last week by farm workers and management at Riverside Farms, an organic lettuce producer, is more than a list of employee rights.

It's what organic-farming leaders say is proof that their once-insignificant industry is becoming a force in the mainstream market.

Riverside is the only fully organic operation where workers have unionized and agreed on a contract, according to Diane Bowen, executive director of the Santa Cruz-based California Certified Organic Farmers. "This is a trend that shows the scale of the organic farms is certainly going to increase," she said.

The presence of the union — Teamsters Local 890 out of Salinas — is just

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one way that once-rigid lines separating organic and conventional farming styles are blurring, they say.

As consumer demand for chemical-free produce expands, organic farms like Riverside are growing in acreage and employees.

Conventional growers also are being forced to experiment with organic farming methods as the government

requires them to cut back on pesticides. Methyl bromide, widely used in strawberry fields, is expected to be banned by 2000, while lettuce and other row crops will be grown without Phosdryn early next year.

"The organic sector is definitely growing," said Fritz Conle, organizer for Teamsters Local 890 in Salinas. "Ten years ago there probably wasn't any significant (organic) workforce to have organized, when it was just mom, pop and their brother-in-law farming a couple of acres for the local farmer's market."

Just four years ago, a handful of Riverside Farms employees farmed 12 acres. Now, with 90 workers covering 250 acres: "We're out there where the big fish are now, and we're not the big fish, so we've got to be a lot tighter,"

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# Organic farm unionizes

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said Andrew Griffin, part-owner of the farm.

As Riverside and other organic farms expand, increased harvests allow them to sell produce at prices competitive with conventional growers, Griffin said. He also credits his company's rapid expansion with the popularity of ready-to-eat products for those too busy to toss their own greens. Riverside produces packaged gourmet salad mix.

The union presence also makes Riverside Farms operate more efficiently, Griffin said, shortening the time it takes to deal with the needs and disputes of 90 workers.

"It's given me stability and clean guidelines by which to manage my crew," said Griffin.

The Teamsters said they'll use a copy of the Riverside contract as a base for future deals with organic farms. The union had to change conventional job categories that don't exist in organic operations.

For example, field workers at Riverside don't harvest head lettuce with a huge harvesting machine, but gather bunches of lettuce picked leaf by leaf. At conventional farms, some 45 workers work one machine pulled by a tractor, where they cut and package lettuce for market in an on-field production line.

Riverside workers such as Antonio Flores don't know what to expect from union leadership. Flores has never worked under a union contract before and was hired after the vote to unionize.

"Some say yes, there are benefits, and others say no, they don't keep their promises," said Flores while picking Red Mustard lettuce

‘Some say yes, there are benefits (to being unionized), and others say no, they don't keep their promises.’

— Antonio Flores, farm worker

last week.

Union organizer Conle said Riverside workers' recent gains are proof enough of the benefits to union representation. The main benefits include a wage increase for field workers from \$5.85 to \$6.10 an hour; truck drivers can make up to \$8.10 an hour. Also under the new contract, workers for the first time will receive one week's paid vacation after two years of employment, and three paid holidays.

One field worker who did not wish to give his name said he wasn't happy about a union contract that he said reduces his paycheck. The contract limits workdays to nine hours. After that, workers are paid overtime, a provision that has discouraged longer workdays, he said.

The Teamsters Local 890 was called to organize the farm after a spat between workers and their foreman in February 1993, after which half the farm's 25 workers were fired.

The contract was not born by plan, but by luck for the Teamsters. Workers said the only reason they asked the Teamsters to represent them instead of the United Farm Workers, better known by field workers, is because the UFW

office was closed the day they sought help.

The workers, including Pedro Ibarria, who is now a foreman, got their jobs back after the dispute was brought to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. Soon after, the Teamsters union was voted in by a single vote.

"It taught me how seriously these people take their work," said Griffin. "We are becoming a more professional farm in every respect, and the union is giving them a more professional self-image."

Amador Meza, 25, said he heard the union will bring him better pay, vacation time and overall benefits, but added that he is still waiting to see results.

Coke Farms, also an organic lettuce grower, operated in Watsonville until it expanded operations and was forced to move to neighboring San Benito County, where land rents are cheaper. Two years ago employees at Coke's were likely the first in the organic business to vote in a union, again the Teamsters. But farm management and union representatives can't agree on a contract, while the Teamsters representation there is being challenged.