

Supermarkets Changing the Face of IFP in Europe

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As I traveled across Europe on my recent sabbatical I was somewhat surprised to find that the Integrated Fruit Production or IFP program in Europe was rapidly changing. Six years ago the IFP program seemed to be well established and relatively stable in places like the South Tyrol of Italy, Switzerland and the low countries of the Netherlands and Belgium.

I expected to find that the program had expanded into countries where there had been little or no previous interest. And such was, indeed, the case. I found new programs in place or being developed in the Jerte and Ebro Valleys of Spain, Provence, France, England and even Eastern Europe. What I did not expect to find, however, was that the driving force behind these changes was coming from supermarket chains and not government programs or growers themselves.

More than anything else, two recent incidents, initially appearing unrelated, played a significant role in impacting the IFP program in Europe. The first of these events was the Mad-Cow or Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy disease in England, the second, a Dioxin scandal in Belgium. With the intent of preventing future incidents, European legislators passed a law making retail stores liable for the safety of the food they sell. This meant that supermarkets could be held directly responsible for food safety issues.

In the United Kingdom (U.K.), government pesticide safety inspectors began to systematically test fruit in supermarkets for pesticide residue and publish the name of the retail store which carried the fruit in what Jerry Cross, a scientist at the East Malling Research Station in England, termed a “name and shame” operation. If residues were found above the maximum allowable, stores were prosecuted. Consequently, Cross maintained, “stores are in a panic.”

In order to combat the perceived legal and public relations threats, representatives from 15 of the largest supermarket chains in Europe formed a retail association called the Euro Retailer Group or EUREP. These retailers have combined forces to develop their own integrated standards for food production. Growers wishing to sell produce to any of these stores must adhere to these standards. Their guidelines state that:

“All growers should be able to demonstrate their commitment to:

- ✦ maintaining consumer confidence in food quality and safety;
- ✦ minimize detrimental impact on the environment, whilst conserving nature and wildlife;
- ✦ reduce the use of agrochemicals through adoption of Integrated Production systems;

- ✦ improve efficiency of use of natural resources such as soil, water, air and energy;
- ✦ ensure a responsible attitude to worker health and safety, welfare and training.”

So far, the standards themselves are relatively easy to comply with. However, Jerry Cross who originally introduced the IFP concept to growers in the U.K. is concerned about the trend towards supermarket intervention. Cross contends that growers who can't or don't comply with the new standards are at significant risk since major supermarkets will not purchase their produce. He argues that this would mean financial ruin for the grower since supermarkets purchase 80% of the produce grown in the U.K. and pay the highest prices.

Even pioneer IFP programs such as AGRIOS in the South Tyrol have fallen under the scrutiny of EUREP representatives. Although AGRIOS standards are more demanding than those of EUREP, the AGRIOS program must be approved by EUREP. Dr. Walther Waldner, director of the South Tyrolean Extension Service, commented that he is now visited three or four times a year by EUREP representatives. They freely question him about the AGRIOS program, visit packing houses, inspect records and interview workers to assure compliance.

In an attempt to influence U.K. guidelines the National Farmers Union (a grower organization) formed a working group with the major U.K. supermarket chains to write a standard guideline for the U.K. Out of this effort came what is known as the “Assured Produce Scheme”. These guidelines have some commonality with IFP but are mostly focused on complying with legal requirements. Growers must certify that they have conformed to a long list of relevant legislation ranging from the clean air act to worker safety. If they answer no to any of the pertinent questions they automatically fail. Inspectors follow-up on applications to make sure of compliance. The failure rate during the first year was over 30%. Growers that fail are fined \$300 to \$450 and they must re-enter the program.

Growers, packing house representatives and scientists throughout Europe uniformly expressed concern over the efforts of large supermarket chains to dictate the direction of the IFP program. Just as uniformly, however, growers and packing houses were complying with these new regulations or were writing their own guidelines to comply with the standards set by EUREP. Most believed there was little that could be done to counter the power EUREP held over European producers. Perhaps most disconcerting, however, was the belief by every individual that I talked to that this same retail association would eventually demand the same standards of American producers wishing to sell produce in Europe.