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Food Alliance tries to recruit Calif. growers

State is a major source of off-season product, official says

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To beef up its presence in the nation's most agriculturally productive state, the Oregon-based Food Alliance nonprofit has taken a "boots on the ground" approach aimed at recruiting California growers.

Food Alliance, which certifies growers and handlers who meet sustainable agriculture standards, hired a state program manager in March to run its new office in Davis, Calif.

The effort is funded by \$365,000 in grants from the Cedar Tree Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"We'd like to see California really take off," said Scott Exo, the organization's executive director.

The organization has certified growers in 18 states, as well as Canada and Mexico. A total of 13 food handlers and about 240 farms are certified by Food Alliance.

However, a vast majority of the handlers and roughly half of the farms are in Oregon.

California has more than 70,000 farms and an agricultural production value that tops \$30 billion - compared to 40,000 growers and a value of \$4 billion in Oregon - but only six farms and one handler in the state are certified by Food Alliance.

Food Alliance would like to increase that number to 40 growers and six handlers within the next two years, a benchmark the organization is confident it can achieve, said Exo.

Expanding the organization's reach into California is important because the state is a major source of off-season product for food buyers who are usually committed to local agriculture, Exo said.

When they must source food from outside their region, such buyers want to ensure it's still produced with sustainable growing practices; for them, certification provides a level of quality assurance, he said.

To meet or surpass Food Alliance's recruitment objectives, the organization's California program manager, David Visher, has a "top-down and bottom-up" strategy. He is meeting with agricultural leaders to spread awareness of Food Alliance, as well as cultivating relationships with buyers to enhance demand for certification.

"Being able to reach out and be heard by those producers is a tremendous challenge in communication," Visher said. "I can't go knock on the door of 70,000 farmers."

Aside from the sheer size of California's farming industry, its complexity will also be a hurdle, said Exo. In fact, agriculture in the state is so diverse that Food Alliance will need to develop new protocols for crops it hasn't encountered before, such as avocados.

For the organization to be taken seriously in California, it needs to study and understand those crop production systems before making specifications, said Visser.

"It needs to be approached in a sophisticated way," he said. "Each of those certification standards takes time and expertise to develop."

On the other hand, some aspects of California agriculture may be conducive to Food Alliance's popularity in the state, said Exo. Growers in California already endure a higher level of regulation, so earning Food Alliance certification may be a smaller leap than it is for growers in less restrictive states, he said.

"I think it will make it easier because people are used to having their practices scrutinized," said Exo.