



Ethical trade - some common questions answered

Are you fed up of trying to decide whether you want organic produce or fairly traded products? We know that organic farming is good for the environment but what about the people producing the food? It would be great if there was a symbol that you could look out for which covered everything - so that you could be safe in the knowledge that the environment, farm animals and employees have all been looked after. Now there is. The Soil Association has an ethical trade scheme.

A bit of background...

In conjunction with the Fairtrade Foundation, we introduced this scheme as a pilot in January 2003. The Fairtrade Foundation, with its partners, aims to ensure that farmers are paid a stable price which covers their production costs. When you buy a product that carries the Fairtrade mark, the farmer has also received an additional premium. This allows their organisation to reinvest either in their business or in social and environmental schemes among the wider community. The term fair trade is particularly associated with marginalised farmers based in the developing world

However it is not just farmers in the developing world that receive a payment which may not even cover their production costs. It is happening here in the UK and many people are leaving farming as it is no longer viable for them to continue. The Soil Association ethical trade pilot scheme seeks to address these issues close to home.

We worked with the Fair Trade Foundation whilst developing the pilot scheme to see if there were ways of combining our similar aims. In recognition of the fact that their work is targeted towards specific produce produced in developing countries, we eventually agreed we would have to work on the project separately whilst maintaining close contact with them. We didn't want to restrict the products that were certified under the new scheme to specific categories as our ethical trade standards may be applied to any organic products, in any country.

Our pilot scheme is receiving a high level of interest from trade, government and public organisations, but what does it mean?

What does your term 'ethical trade' mean?

It means an ethos of trading and doing business that addresses the three critical areas of:

- Fair treatment of workers
- A fairer return for farmers
- A positive contribution to the local community

The Soil Association has produced these as additional, voluntary standards to complement existing organic certification. They help to give existing organic social principles a more concrete form. Social principles have always been at the heart of the development of organic

standards, we are now in a position to emphasise these principles and strengthen the overall credibility of our work.

What should I look for when I am shopping?



This symbol will mean that the farmer and every other company others in the supply chain have received a fairer return, their workers have been fairly treated and the participating farms and companies are involved in contributing to their local communities. For example the farm may be open to the public, it may run recycling or composting programmes or it may run a profit-sharing scheme.

It is still early days, however we have had lots of positive response from companies wanting to join the pilot. As these companies work through the thorough certification and inspection system that is required, products which carry the ethical trade symbol will be more widely available. The first food to be awarded the ethical organic mark is Doves Farm Foods Bio Biz breakfast cereal and Doves Farm plain flour.

How does the Soil Association check that the ethical trade standards are met?

For a product to carry the symbol, everyone in the supply chain - each producer, processor, trader, wholesaler, importer and distributor must conform to the Soil Association ethical trade standards. The certification department will request information to verify that each company can comply with our ethical trade standards, once this has been done we will issue each company with a certificate. This information will also be checked at annual inspections.

What sort of thing do you ask for?

- Terms of employment for both permanent & temporary workers including: wages paid, hours of work, job descriptions, overtime, access to trade unions, complaints procedure, health & safety, disciplinary procedure, holiday and sick pay and compensation for injury & other benefits.
- Information on the trading relationships such as: transparency & accountability, fair distribution of risks & rewards, long-term agreements in order to ensure stability & security, adequate return to cover cost of production & return for investment
- Information on the wider benefit to the community such as: staff organic & social awareness training, additional on-site services for staff (e.g. provision of organic food), profit sharing or equity interest, education of the public & / or training within the supply chain, farm visits / access, support or involvement in organic research, composting & recycling programmes, local marketing of own produce

Can the Soil Association's Ethical Trade logo be applied to non-organic products?

No. The ethical trade symbol can only be applied to organic products which are certified by

the SA Certification.

This is because the symbol demonstrates that the product has met Soil Association organic standards and our additional SA ethical trade standards.

Does this mean that produce which does not bear this logo will have been unethically traded?

No. This scheme provides an opportunity for companies to communicate their good work. It certainly does not imply that products which do not carry this symbol are unethically traded or that the employees have been unfairly treated. Organic principles have always recognised the importance of social and ethical issues. The basic standards of the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM), to which the Soil Association Certification Ltd is accredited, include social guidelines. These stipulate that workers should be provided with decent minimum conditions of employment, consistent with international conventions.

How can I support the work of the Soil Association?

The Soil Association is a membership charity, we urgently need your support to continue our work. As public support for the Soil Association continues to grow, our ability to influence the thinking and policies of government and big business grows with it. In this way we help to develop a truly healthy and sustainable future. Join us today and help us to continue campaigning for sustainable agriculture and organic food. You can join the Soil Association on our website, over the phone or by writing to us.

Further Reading

Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for more information

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