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EcoConsumer

How to know if a product meets fair trade guidelines

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Can you really help cure social and environmental ills half a world away just by switching the brand of coffee you drink, or the type of wood you use for home renovation projects?



HEATHER MCKINNON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

That's the promise of the "fair trade" movement. And the answer, proponents say, is yes.

Yesterday was World Fair Trade Day. The movement has strong support in Europe and has steadily gained adherents in the U.S. over the past 20 years.

More than 2 billion people worldwide live on the equivalent of less than a dollar a day, according to former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. The hallmark of fair trade is that producers of a product receive a fair wage.

Fair trade also emphasizes worker safety and environmental protection. And fair trade products often cost about the same as competing products, since higher wages for producers are offset by reducing the role and profits of the "middleman."

But how do you know whether the product you're buying fairly benefits the people who made it? Various organizations support or regulate fair trade, creating a bewildering network of programs.

Many fair trade efforts involve certification and labeling, to provide assurance those goals are met. Choosing Fair Trade Certified food and beverage products or Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified wood products, for example, benefits farmers and producers, as well as the environment.

The nonprofit TransFair USA, the U.S. member of the global group Fairtrade Labelling Organizations

International, certifies coffee, tea, chocolate, rice, sugar and a few fresh fruits. The term "Fair Trade Certified" is trademarked by TransFair USA. In a separate program, SmartWood, a project of the Rainforest Alliance, certifies forest managers and wood product producers to FSC standards.

No fair trade certification program exists for clothing and crafts. However, stores that sell fair trade crafts and apparel may be members of the Fair Trade Federation, or registered as a Fair Trade Organization. Local retailers in the Fair Trade Federation include Ten Thousand Villages, Far East Handicrafts and the El Quetzal Project, all in Seattle.

Not surprisingly, coffee has gained the strongest foothold among fair trade products in the Puget Sound area. You can find Fair Trade Certified coffee at hundreds of coffee shops, the Landmark chain of movie theaters, various food co-ops and nearly every major grocery chain. Many of them carry blends from Tony's Coffee, a pioneering Seattle-based specialty roaster of fair trade coffee.

The largest purchaser of Fair Trade Certified coffee in North America is Seattle's own Starbucks, which buys 11.5 million pounds of fair trade coffee a year.

Coffee may also be certified organic, or documented as shade-grown (which supports bird populations). Even coffee with all three of those criteria may not necessarily cost more than other specialty coffee. Chocolate and tea lovers can also find those fair trade products at many locations.

As an alternative to buying fair trade products from far away, you should also consider supporting local small farmers and producers by shopping at farmers markets, or purchasing wood products from local area sources. Minimizing transportation of products reduces environmental impacts.

The Forest Stewardship Council wood products certification program emphasizes sustainable forest management. Area retailers carrying FSC products include Dunn Lumber, Compton Lumber, Lumbermen's, Home Depot, Lowe's, Environmental Home Center and West Coast Paper.

As an alternative to the independent FSC certification program, the forest products industry developed its own self-certification system, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. King County Solid Waste Division's "green building" expert Katie Spataro says FSC is considered the more rigorous program, according to most green building advocates and a third-party study (www.merid.org/comparison).

Critics assail fair trade programs for various flaws, or dismiss them as tokenism. But TransFair USA points out that so far, it has sent nearly \$75 million in above-market coffee revenue to small-scale coffee farmers in developing countries. It's hard to knock a program like that, especially when American consumers can support it without paying more for their daily jolt of java.

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