

Dutch farmers launch better foods label

In Europe changes to ensure food is safe, healthy and residue-free are being initiated not just by consumers, NGOs or governments but by all elements of the supply chain. In the Netherlands a farmers' cooperative is working with NGOs to develop a new label identifying produce grown under low pesticide protocols. **Elliott Cannell** reports.

Farmers belonging to Dutch agricultural cooperative FrEsteem have become the first agricultural producers in the Netherlands to market fruits and vegetables under the newly created *Better for Health and Environment* label. Tomatoes carrying the logo hit supermarket shelves in October and were available to consumers shopping at C1000, the third biggest supermarket chain in the Netherlands.

The food produce labelling scheme is a joint initiative established by FrEsteem agricultural producers and the *Weet Wat Je Eet* (*Know what you eat*) partnership of Dutch environmental NGOs Milieudefensie and Natuur en Milieu, as well as consumer organisation Goede Waar en Co. The project aims to help consumers identify fruits and vegetables grown under low pesticide protocols and with extra care for health and the environment.

Successful partnership

The *Know what you eat* partnership has been campaigning actively against pesticides for over five years. Between 2002 and 2005 they carried out pesticide residue testing on produce from eight of the biggest supermarkets in the Netherlands publishing their results and the residue testing results of the Dutch Food Safety Authority (VWA) [PN71 p6]. Their efforts persuaded three supermarkets (Aldi, Lidl and Super de

Boer) to apply standards which are stricter than is legally required.

New initiative

The *Better for Health and Environment* label is the latest initiative of the partnership. 'Following our earlier supermarket campaigns for better protection of the environment and health, we were approached by the farmers of FrEsteem', said Rene Houkema, Agricultural Policy Officer, Milieudefensie. 'They were interested in developing a way of identifying quality food produce grown under low pesticide protocols, which would meet the recommendations of our *Know what you eat* campaign. Within several months, together we developed the *Better for Health and Environment* agricultural scheme.'

'It's fantastic to see the first fresh fruits and vegetables now on sale in Dutch supermarkets carrying the 'Better for Health and Environment' logo said Rene. Our vision now is that these environmental and health criteria become a kind of Dutch standard carried by all mainstream foods'.

Foods carrying the *Better for Health and Environment* label must contain:

- no residues above 70% of the Maximum Residue Level (MRL)
- a maximum of three different residues
- a combined sum of percentage ARIDs (Acute Reference Doses) which does not



The 'Better for Health and Environment' logo identifies foods grown under low pesticide protocols

exceed 100%

Farmers operating under the scheme must:

- work towards the eventual production of pesticide-free foods by adopting Integrated Pest Management protocols
- avoid spraying the 12 pesticides listed on the Dutch blacklist: amitrole, captan, carbendazim, chlorpyrifos, deltamethrin, dicofol, imidacloprid, iprodion, maneb, metam sodium, methamidofos and linuron (selected due to their human and environmental toxicity and their relevance to the Dutch market)
- share all internal residue monitoring data
- avoid banned or unauthorised pesticides
- minimise energy use and emissions of greenhouse gases (guidelines are currently being developed)
- reduce emissions of artificial light
- reduce visual impacts on the environment
- reduce leaching of nutrients

FrEsteem is a progressive Dutch agricultural cooperative encompassing 40 farmers growing tomatoes and sweet peppers with a combined agricultural area of 450 hectares. At present five producers comply with the *Better for Health and Environment* standards – producing 9,000 tonnes of sweet peppers and 36,000 tonnes of tomatoes. More FrEsteem farmers plan to carry the label and it is likely that other producers will follow as the market expands.

The *Know what you eat* partnership is currently working with Milieukeur (an Environmental hallmark) to officially accredit the scheme within their guidelines. This should be established for vegetables grown under glass by February 2009 and then for fruits grown under glass later in 2009.

Looking to the future, Dutch farmer and member of FrEsteem, Frank van Kleef, said other Dutch producers would want to comply with the standards amid growing consumer demand for quality mainstream food produce. Currently, only one supermarket (C1000) is stocking the produce but others are likely to follow suit as the market expands.

FrEsteem: <http://www.freestem.nl/>



Four members of pioneering Dutch farming cooperative FrEsteem. Frank van Kleef, second from the right was voted 'Best Agriculture Entrepreneur of 2008' Photo: FrEsteem