

Organic certification & emerging trends in coconut

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Organic agriculture has been gaining momentum in the recent years. The market for organic products is also on the increase, since more consumers started purchasing organic products. More and more consumers are becoming aware of the safety of food and they prefer to buy food, which is free from pesticide residues and harmful chemicals. The need for certified organic products have increased many folds as it is required to establish the trust between the consumers and the farmers who are separated by a distance. Organic products are grown in most effective environment friendly way and are verified as per the national and international organic standards. Dependence on external inputs for manuring, pest, disease and weed control are minimized or even excluded. Thus the cost of cultivation is minimized and the resultant products are nutritionally rich and have better shelf life.

Organic certification addresses a growing worldwide demand for organic food. It is intended to assure quality and to promote sustainable business. Such certification was not necessary in the early days of the organic movement as the consumers used to source directly at farmers' markets. As organic products gained popularity, more and more consumers started to purchase organic food through traditional channels, such as supermarkets and fine food shop. Hence the consumers start relying on third-party regulatory certification.

LACON, one of the leading German certification bodies, has been involved in organic certification and other quality certification since 1989. The Indian office of LACON was started in Kerala in 2002, accredited by the National Accreditation Board having its secretariat at APEDA. Lacon certifies project across 24 states, including North-Eastern states of India. The brand value of LACON has helped the farmers to access international market in addition to the growing domestic market.

In India, Agricultural & Processed foods Export Development Authority (APEDA), regulates the certification of organic products as per National Standards for Organic Production (NPOP). "The NPOP standards for Agricultural production and accreditation system have been recognized by European Commission and Switzerland for unprocessed products, as equivalent to their standards. Similarly, USDA has recognized Indian conformity assessment procedures of accreditation as equivalent to that of National Organic



Programme (NOP) which is the organic standards of USA. With these recognitions, Indian organic products duly certified by the accredited certification bodies of India are accepted by the importing countries, especially in Europe and USA.

Organic certification is a third party verification check to confirm the compliance level of the farm or the chain of activities involved in farm production, processing and trade with the respective organic standards. In general, any chain of activity, directly involved in organic food production needs to be certified, including agricultural production of individual farms or group of farms, processing, packing, storage, labeling and transport.

Requirements vary from country to country, and generally involve a set of production standards for growing, storage, processing, packaging and transportation that include;

Avoidance of synthetic chemical inputs as per the NPOP standards (e.g. Soil Conditioners, Plant protection products, Fertilizers, food additives etc.), genetically modified organisms, irradiation and the use of sewage sludge. Farmland that has been free from prohibited synthetic chemicals for a number of years (often, 2-3 years) need to be used. Detailed written documentation on agricultural production, processing and sales records (audit trail) and strict physical separation of organic products from non-certified products should be kept. Periodic annual on-site inspections need to be conducted.

Certification is essentially aimed at regulating and facilitating the sale of organic products by creating trust between producers and the consumers. Individual certification bodies have their own trade mark, which can act as branding to consumers. Being a reputed German brand, LACON's logo has high consumer recognition value and gives a marketing advantage to the farmers.

For the farm certification, the soil must meet basic requirements of being free from use of prohibited substances (synthetic chemicals, etc.) for a number of years. A conventional farm must adhere to organic



standards for this period, often two to three years. This is known as conversion period. The perennial crops require three years, whereas the annual crops require two years of conversion period, to get the organic status.

The Organic certification efforts of small holder groups helped the small farmers, especially in India, to participate in the organic certification and this has impacted upon the livelihoods of producers and the environment. Organic certification of small farmers is based on effective functioning of the internal control system (ICS) which is a similar verification system practiced internally by the group members. ICS help individual small farmers to interact and invoke group dynamics. Thus the group can build on their strength and opportunities for collective marketing and gain better price. LACON builds the trust to develop and broaden the external links with major buyers and exporters.

Certification for operations other than farms, like processing and trade follows similar procedures. The focus is on the traceability of the raw materials, quality of ingredients and other inputs used during the processing or handling stages. In addition, short-notice or surprise inspections can be made, and specific analyses (e.g. soil, water, plant tissue) may be performed.

Organic food products manufactured and exported from India are marked with the mandatory “India Organic” certification mark, which is the registered trade mark of Indian organic products. The products are labeled as per the percentage of organic ingredients used in the final product, according to the national and international organic standards. There are specific label requirements for each country and it is stipulated in the respective regulations.

The awareness on health triggered a new revolution on organic food & wellness industry worldwide. Proportionately the demand increased and currently there is shortage of genuine suppliers of such organic certified products. The sale of organic products in the domestic market as well as the export markets have increased and the demand for certified organic products are on the rise. Organic food and cosmetic segments have registered steep growth and will continue to grow for a long term.

Recent recognition of the health benefits of coconut products has increased the demand for the products, especially for virgin coconut oil & coconut palm sugar. The use of coconut based products for the cosmetic industry has also increased tremendously. American medical journals and European research associations have identified the value of coconut products recently and hence there is sudden uptake of the above products during the last one year. As a result, many of the international buyers are trying to locate organic certified sources of coconut garden and processing units to cater to the demand. There are specific reasons for the increase in demand of these products.

Coconut Palm sugar: A sugar substitute that seems to be gaining popularity in the national and international market. It is made from sap that is extracted from the coconut tree which is usually sold as “Neera”. For cooking purposes, it has a very low melt temperature and an extremely high burn temperature so it can be used in baked products in place of sugar. Its low glycemic index, (a measure of how a food raises blood glucose) is a better choice for people with diabetes than regular sugar.

Virgin Coconut Oil: Although it is a 90% saturated fat, organic coconut oil contains medium-chain fatty acids that can improve human health in many ways. Organic coconut oil is very stable to cook, as it withstands high temperatures without heat damage. Organic coconut oil is now being recognized by the medical community as a powerful tool against immune system related diseases. Several studies have been done on its effectiveness in this area and research is currently underway concerning the incredible nutritional value of pure organic virgin coconut oil. Organic coconut oil is highly nutritious and contains a superior disease fighting fatty acid called lauric acid. It is also rich in fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

There are many other products like organic coconut vinegar and beverages; coconut meat and desiccated coconut, in addition to the non-edible products like fiber, activated carbon etc, which are unique and having ever growing demand in the international market.

The potential of organic certified coconut based products are immense and hence there is great potential for the coconut farmers to earn better profitability from coconut cultivation. The wide range of value added products that comes out of a single tree can be the best investment for the farmers. Since there are positive reports released by the research scholars, the demand may increase tremendously. Thus coconut is one of the promising crops for the Indian farmers.

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