

Domestic Fair Trade Rising:

Reflections from the Domestic Fair Trade Association annual meeting

BY COLETTE COSNER

Wendell Berry once wrote that the definition of community is “the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives.” The Domestic Fair Trade Association (DFTA) annual gathering is the embodiment of what it means to truly share space in the food system.

Our trade association represents farmworkers, farmers, retailers, processors, distributors, and NGOs working to transform the agricultural system with the understanding that our whole is greater than the sum of our parts. This year, our diverse coalition gathered in New Orleans for several days of cross-sector collaboration and community building, critical practices for the creation of just, healthy, and sustainable food systems.

Below, check out what our members had to say about the experience:

Ernesto Velez, executive director of Centro Campesino (farmworker stakeholder group)

“After the conclusion of the DFTA annual meeting, the five women attending from Manos Latinas in Minnesota and I hit the road back to Owatonna, Minn.

“The long drive gave us enough time to talk about the biggest lessons learned during the gathering and site visits in New Orleans. One of the biggest lessons was the understanding that the word “organic” can be interpreted in many ways even within regions of Mexico and the USA, mostly because each region has its own culture and language for the agricultural practices that we know as organic farming.

“Another great lesson was the demographics within our stakeholder group and how each community had the same struggles as the next, but with a few differences. For example, Farmworker Association of Florida [builds] greater capacity around pesticide education of the community, while Community to

Community Development is currently dealing with farmworker union issues, as some members of Manos Latinas did in Minnesota ten years ago. The greater lesson learned for our farm worker families is that we are all part of larger food chain and that, in order to drastically improve our current situation, we also have to make sure that everyone within our stakeholder group is at the same place and so on throughout the entire chain.”

Joann Lo, Food Chain Workers Alliance and DFTA board member (NGO stakeholder group)

“I was excited and happy to join this year’s DFTA annual meeting after missing the last two when another individual represented the Food Chain Workers Alliance at those meetings. The DFTA brings together such a diverse group of organizations, businesses, and individuals who all believe in the principles of domestic fair trade. And the NGOs/Civil Society Organizations sector of the DFTA is also reflective of this diversity.

“Folks really enjoyed the tour on the first day and meeting with local farmers and activists who are working for food justice and food sovereignty. We also appreciated getting to know each other better during the peer review breakout, when member organizations were paired together to share more in-depth about their work and strategies in relation to the DFTA principles.

“During our sector breakout, we easily nominated Marty Mesh from the Florida Organic Growers and Consumers to fill the second NGO representative spot on the DFTA board of directors and spent time brainstorming other organizations and stakeholder groups to recruit to become members of the DFTA.

“We all look forward to continuing to connect and collaborate throughout the year until our next annual meeting!”

Rob Michalak, Ben and Jerry’s (processor group—associate member)

“It’s a source of deep inspiration to know that some of the biggest heroes in the world accomplish amazing things in obscure places, against the odds, with daunting obstacles. We met a few of these remarkable, unheralded people at the 2014 annual meeting of the Domestic Fair Trade Association in New Orleans. They just get it done.

“It’s the same way I feel about DFTA members. They are getting it done throughout North America, representing a model that is standing up for fair, just, and sustainable social and economic systems. The way I see it, DFTA members represent the leaders of social and economic justice in North American agriculture and business at large.

“Personally, I love the field trips. I get a lot of value visiting sites that provide us with strong examples of food and agricultural justice. The day in the field was great. But I also appreciate the mix of the meetings, engaging in sessions that were both interactive and plenary in structure. But, the field trips: love them!”

Rosalinda Guillen, executive director, Community to Community Development (farmworker stakeholder group):

“Spending time with the representatives of all the member organizations forming the Domestic Fair Trade Association serves to remind me of how truly diverse and complex our food system is. Community to Community Development is a founding member organization and led by farm workers from the Northwest. Dialoguing with our stakeholder group of farm worker leaders from all over the U.S. is vital to our work to create better livelihoods for farm worker families. But more importantly we cherish the opportunity to have productive conversations with the other stakeholder groups of family farmers, retailers, and processors. We create the space together to envision a healthier and more just way of producing, processing, marketing, and selling healthy food from seed to table.”



Photo credit: DFTA

► Guillen continued, “As the at-large board member, I know that all the stakeholder groups are excited to launch the evaluation process of food labels claiming domestic fair trade. I left the DFTA annual meeting in New Orleans inspired and re-energized knowing that we are building integrity into domestic fair trade.”

Allison Meyer, Seward Co-op, Minneapolis, Minn. (retailer group):

“Being hosted by New Orleans Food Co-op during DFTA’s 2014 annual meeting was very special, particularly because New Orleans Food Co-op is a relatively new DFTA member and because the city itself provides an opportunity to reflect on social inequities. The building that houses the co-op, the New Orleans Healing Center, has a peaceful and grounding atmosphere. Our member enjoyed a pleasant

and unique meeting space, supported by tasty meals from area businesses. Conversations ranging from food justice and equity to farmworker rights and labeling were inspiring during our time together.

“The DFTA’s work is so important in its capacity to build bridges between the social, environmental and agricultural justice movements (and others)! Thanks to this recent annual meeting and the organizing done by New Orleans Food Co-op staff and board members, we have new partners in the domestic fair trade movement in the Bayou, and for that we are grateful.”

The DFTA Annual Meeting was hosted by the New Orleans Food Co-op and affirmed the important role cooperative grocers play in the domestic fair trade movement. As consumers’ first point of contact with the supply chain, our

movement relies on retailers to help promote products that reflect fairness to farmworkers and farmers. This is a tricky job as the landscape of ethical labeling expands and confounds.

In 2014 the DFTA launched the Fair Facts programs (<http://fairfacts.thedfta.org/>), an initiative that evaluates fair trade and social justice certification programs with participation from those most directly impacted: farmers and farmworkers. We hope these evaluations are a resource to members of our association and beyond.

To find out more about the Domestic Fair Trade Association and the Fair Facts program, please visit www.thedfta.org. The DFTA’s next annual meeting is slated for the Pacific Northwest in December of 2015. We hope see you there. ■

Cooperative Grocer

FOR RETAILERS AND COOPERATORS

IN FUTURE ISSUES...

- Local food alliances: Ontario co-ops
- Hot-button issues and messy situations
- General manager succession planning
- Commons management and cooperative principles