

Fair-trade apples sought; growers may benefit

BY MARNI LEFF

P-I reporter

The United Farm Workers of America want to bring fair-trade apples to grocery stores around the country as soon as next year.

The labor group kicked off a campaign yesterday aimed at raising public awareness about the conditions for apple workers and pressuring retailers to pay a fair price for the fruit they sell in their grocery stores.

"Retail food chains get an unfair percentage of the price that our country's consumers pay for their harvest," said Guadalupe Gamboa, state director of the United Farm Workers.

Gamboa, who spoke at a news conference with Washington State Labor Council President Rick Bender, said that the campaign will help ease the pressure on Washington's apple

farmers who have struggled in recent years to eke out the smallest of profits.

Right now retailers take a 68 percent share of each dollar that the consumer spends on apples, according to the labor leaders and Tom Schotzko, an extension economist in Washington State University's Department of Agricultural Economics.

Farmers and growers take a combined 11 percent, with the remaining 21 percent spent on packing, sales and transportation costs.

Although the labor leaders said that retailers have built in a significant profit margin on apples, Schotzko said it is hard to figure out exactly how much grocers make off produce sales. "It's not a high-profit industry," Schotzko said of the grocery business. "Unfortunately, it appears that what little profit retailers do manage to make is probably coming out of meat

and produce so the growers in those sectors get hit harder."

In the coffee industry, a recent initiative stipulates that growers get at least \$1.26 per pound for their beans in order for the coffee to be certified as fair trade. Apple industry leaders haven't set a minimum price, but said they will put stickers on fair-trade apples.

Although the labor leaders made it clear yesterday that they expect to have the support of the growers, Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League, said he'd likely turn down an invitation to meet with the United Farm Workers next week.

"The apple industry representatives never contacted us to participate in the campaign or its planning," Gempler said, though he acknowledged that he'd recently received the invitation to meet with the labor leaders.

Gempler said that he welcomes changes that will lead to greater profits for struggling growers and workers, and he didn't rule out working with the organization in the future.

His problem with the United Farm Workers is that they have tied their fair-trade campaign to their support for a NAFTA labor side-agreement complaint that will be heard at a public forum in Yakima next week.

The Washington Growers League opposes the complaint because it could lead to sanctions that would bar apple exports to Mexico.

Dick Boushey, a Yakima Valley farmer who grew apples for 25 years before switching to more lucrative cherry and grape crops, said the fair-trade apple idea has real merit.

"This is something we should have done a long time ago," he said. "If we can persuade the public that would be a powerful thing."