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Rod Braga honored at sold-out Organic Grower Summit

By

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Cited for being a pioneer in the organic farming world, Rod Braga, president and CEO of Braga Fresh, was named the 2023 Organic Grower Summit Grower of the Year at its show in Monterey, CA, Nov. 29-30.

In receiving the award, Braga noted that the company started its organic journey in the 1990s with baby lettuces, and today 70 percent of its 20,000 acres are farmed organically. It is one of the largest organic vegetable producers in the United States with a full line of commodities. It markets its organic production under the Josie label, which is the name of Braga's grandmother.

Braga Fresh Farms has now embarked on an effort to be a leader in the regenerative ag movement as it is experimenting with a couple of crops in an effort to learn about the concept, which calls for limited tilling and other farming practices to sequester carbon in the earth. Braga said the practices involve constant improvement of the soil, continually making it better both for the good of the plant and the planet.

In discussing his organic journey, Braga said it succeeded after lots of ups and down and failures. He advised new organic growers to start slowly, taking small steps and not trying to scale too fast, as there is a lot of learning involved that can't be rushed.

When asked, Braga said he was inspired by many other Salinas Valley ag leaders as a young man to be both a good businessman and a leader in the community. He singled out Tom Nunes, who started The Nunes Co. with his brother in the 1970s, and Basil Mills, who also worked with his brother at Mills Distributing Co. for many decades.

The OGS featured a two-day, sold-out show as well as a plethora of educational sessions and more than 600 attendees.

One of the more time-sensitive sessions dealt with the National Organic Programs Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule, which goes into effect on March 19. Each of the four panelists as well as the moderator noted that the new SOE rule requires almost everyone who is involved in the organic produce supply chain to be operating from a certified facility.

"If you are not certified, you need to leave this room and get certified," warned Meredith

Kiser, compliance director for Heath & Lejeune, a Los Angeles area distributor of organic produce.

With only 110 days between the Nov. 29 date of the workshop and the beginning of enforcement, there is virtually no wiggle room in which to begin the process. It may already be too late to start the process and expect certification to be finalized. Nonetheless, that process must be started and must be started as quickly as humanly possible was the point driven home time and time again by the panelists.



Bianca Kaprelian

(center) of Fruit World talks about the new SOE rule during an OGS session. Other members of the dais included Meredith Kiser of Heath & Lejeune, April Vasquez of CCOF, Kaprielian, Dr. Jennifer Tucker of NOP and moderator John Foster of Wolf & Associates.

Moderator John Foster, chief operating officer of the consulting firm Wolf & Associates, said every produce company that lies anywhere on the supply chain from grower to retailer must become familiar with the new rule and make sure they are in compliance,

National Organic Program Deputy Administrator Jennifer Tucker said the most important element of the new rule is that it reduces the number of companies that are exempt from certification. Every day she is fielding questions from companies believing they are exempt from certification. For the most part that is not true.

While retail stores are exempt, retail distribution centers must be certified unless 100 percent of the

organic product they receive moves through the facility in tamper-evident packaging. And even then, if receivers broke the seal and inspected that product in a facility not certified, the product would lose its right to be labeled with the organic seal.

Tucker expressed surprise that many companies, especially retailers, are looking at the tamper-evident packaging exception as a loophole. Many retailers, especially the larger ones, are apparently asking their suppliers to switch their packaging to comply. While that is possible for some items, it's hard to imagine all organic produce being able to be shipped in such packaging. Organic bananas, for example, typically arrive at the DC in open air packaging that allows for degreening. Organic watermelon and hard squashes typically are packed in large bins that would not qualify.

Bianca Kaprielian, CEO and co-owner of Fruit World in Reedley, CA, said it would be a huge financial lift if her company had to pack all of their organic offerings in tamper-evident packaging. In the first place, she noted that for some commodities, such as organic grapes, she has three years of packaging in inventory as that is the smallest quantity she can buy for her relatively small volume of product.

While Fruit World has very little leverage to resist the request of large retailers, Tucker told those in the audience to contact the NOP with help in that regard. She indicated that the USDA department can contact these retailers and discuss the intent of the new rule as well as the relative ease in actually getting certified.

During the session, several speakers spoke of a scenario in which a load, or even a pallet, of organic produce in tamper-evident packaging is rejected at a DC. Presumably the packaging was compromised and if that produce moves from a non-certified dock, it can no longer be sold as certified organic. The same is true with any cross docking of organic product in regular packaging at a non-certified facility.

After March 19, Heath & Lejeune's Kiser said the distributor will not be working with supply chain partners that are not certified for this very reason. In fact, she has been diligently tracking the progress of the company's partners and she expects each one will be certified by Jan. 1.

Another speaker on the panel was April Vasquez, who is the chief certification officer for California Certified Organic Farmers, one of the larger organic certifying organizations in the country. She said that any company that has not started the process is going to find it difficult to get it done prior to March 19. But she said it is not a difficult task to become certified. She indicated that most companies with computer-based systems already have most of the documentation they need residing somewhere within that system.

Another session that generated a lot of interest at OGS was the regenerative ag movement workshop. Panelists agreed that organic farming practices should be the baseline for any official regenerative ag certification, though Eric Morgan of Braga Fresh does not expect that to be the case, at least in California.

Jessy Beckett Parr, chief program officer for CCOF led off the questioning by asking each panelist where they stood regarding the role of organic farming in a regenerative ag certification program. CCOF does offer a Regenerative Organic Certified certificate that does require organic farming certification as a baseline.

“We believe regenerative has to include organics,” Morgan said. “Unfortunately, we don't

think the tide is moving in that direction. I am an organics-only guy, but it doesn't look like it's going in that direction."

He was speaking of current discussions by the State Board of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. California is taking the lead on this issue as there is currently no government-based rules on regenerative ag in the country. Many companies are claiming they are regenerative ag practitioners but they basically are making up their own definitions. Morgan believes it is very important what California ultimately does as many other states tend to follow the lead of the nation's largest state.

Top photo: Grower of the Year Rod Braga with Cale Sledge, director of western U.S. sales of Fendt for AGCO, who presented the award and engaged Braga in a conversation on center stage so OGS attendees could get to know him.

[Tim Linden](#)



Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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