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## Eco-Farm Conference draws hundreds, addresses key issues

By **TOM RAGAN**, Sentinel Staff Writer

PACIFIC GROVE — As corporations start buying and selling organic produce, smaller organic growers are worried about competing against megastores without sacrificing quality.

That was one of the issues the 27th annual Ecological Farming Conference addressed during its first full day Thursday. The conference ends Saturday.

Hundreds of organic growers, traders and connoisseurs at the Asilomar Conference Grounds heard from a panel of experts with firsthand experience.

"It is the nature of the big fish to continue to swallow the minnows," said Aaran Stephens, president and founder of Nature's Path, an organic breakfast cereal company in Port Richmond, British Columbia. He said selling out is not in "the interest of the organic movement"

Stephens encouraged the audience to ensure future growers are up to snuff with standards.

Anybody can follow the federal and state guidelines and create an organic product, he said, but what separates the purists from

those looking to make a buck is the difference between doing the minimum to meet the guidelines and going beyond the call of duty.

Bob Scowcroft of the Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation said it's important for organic growers and sellers to admit they've made mistakes when appropriate.

"Transparency is extremely important, but most of all you have to be profoundly committed," he said.

The multibillion-dollar industry is growing so fast it's hard to keep up with demand.

Sales have increased 20 percent annually, leading some conventional farmers to embrace the organic concept, which is basically shunning traditional pesticides and herbicides and growing crops naturally.

But the success of the organic movement is not without problems. The cost of organic produce, for example, has long been expensive, which is where low prices offered by such megastores as Wal-Mart come into play.

When some Wal-Mart stores were found to have misrepresented themselves last September by labeling nonorganic food as "organic," The Cornucopia Institute took them to task.

"But instead of admitting their mistakes, they Wal-Mart, in effect, said they did nothing wrong," said Sam Fromartz, a business journalist and author of "Organic Inc.: Natural Foods and How they Grew"

Carmela Beck, a former UC Santa Cruz student who wants to get into farming, said she loves organic food, and yet she can't afford it all the time.

"I'll buy organic fruit and organic vegetables, but it's the meat and the chicken and the cheese that I don't have the money for," she said. "But I understand why it's cost prohibitive. That's what happens when you grow an outstanding product"

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