

Uttaranchal treads a path less travelled

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Selling organic farming to cultivators is child's play compared to making inroads into the export market. The team steering Uttaranchal into the 'organic' zone knows this. So, even as it courts foreign buyers and takes small steps into that market, Binita Shah of Uttaranchal Organic Commodities Board is clear that the initial focus is the domestic market. "We are not running to foreign markets at the moment," says Shah. "We are focusing on the domestic market and have tied up with agencies."

For instance, within six months, 2,000 families in Delhi could be joining 'box schemes'-getting a range of organic items, with some others thrown in, at a small premium. At a small level, sales have already taken off in Bangalore. Fab India and KVIC have shown interest. Brand promotion, rather than the premium, is the focus right now.

State chief secretary R. S. Tolia accepts that his state is inflicting on itself a harsher regime of agricultural production, with benchmarks on quality and food safety that can be difficult to maintain. Within the state, the four-month-old Board is pushing an internal control system. The most difficult task, however, will be external inspection by international accredited agencies to get the prized organic certification, which could yield a premium on crops.

Uttaranchal has tied up with the Institute for Market ecology, which offers verification and certification services. Given the fragmentation of land holdings-the average being 0.5 hectares-individual farmers can't hope to make a difference in production or pay for certification which can be as much as Rs. 2,000 to 3,000 a day, apart from travel costs and documentation. So, there is a need to look at regions, not farmers, to get viable production numbers. And, naturally thereafter, look at the concept of group certification. About 1,650 farmers have been put through the external inspection, says Shah. But whether group certification would eventually be acceptable in a market like Europe remains to be seen. For the moment, there is buyer support-and assistance-for a transition phase, certification, import procedures and other barriers. About 40 tonnes of rice is heading to Germany. There is a proposal from Japan on finger millet for baby food. "We expect the impact to show in 2005," says Shah. But there is a lot to do.