

Sajeemas Pasakdee and Ganesan Srinivasan (from left) inspect herbs at Fresno State's organically certified greenhouse. The university plans to expand organic farm operations with a \$250,000 government grant.

The push to go organic

USDA grant to help Fresno State expand farming, education

Gabriel Dillard - STAFF WRITER

A government grant should help California State University, Fresno expand its organic farming operations beyond a small vegetable plot and greenhouse.

School officials said a three-year, \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will go toward prepping students for jobs in organic agriculture, which has grown from a \$1-billion industry in the U.S. in 1990 to a \$20-billion powerhouse in 2007.

To meet the demands of the fast-growing segment of the food market, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology plans to certify more organic acreage, offer more naturally-grown products in its farm market and start a student internship program with local organic growers, said Ganesan Srinivasan, director of the university's farm operations.

Most of all, students should have more opportunities to learn about

the unique technical and economic challenges facing organic farmers. From weed and pest control to recordkeeping and marketing, it's a different world than conventional farming, he said.

"We want to train students to understand what organic farmers need," Srinivasan said.

Fresno State currently operates more than 1,000 acres of farmland, but a 0.8-acre plot northeast of the Save Mart Center is the only land that has been certified organic. By comparison, California State University, Chico has 60 acres of organic land. U.C. Davis has 20 acres and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo maintains 11 acres. The College of the Sequoias in Visalia helps run an organic dairy.

Organic farming has been a point of debate in agricultural circles. Many say it is nothing but a marketing ploy for some farmers to make more money. But Srinivasan said there is a fine line between profit and loss when farmers grow

food without pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

"Many farmers believe in the altruistic mission, but it has to make economic sense," Srinivasan said.

He added Fresno State's mission is to produce well-rounded students, and not to forge opinions on the organic versus conventional question. "We don't want to be involved in the debate," he said.

The Fresno State farm should increase its organic acreage substantially in the next three or four years, Srinivasan said. Upwards of 20 acres would be located next to the Campus Pointe development. The final number of acres slated for organic certification should be decided by the end of the month, he said.

Workers recently started leveling and grading for Campus Pointe. The development is slated to include 180,000 square feet of retail

Organic | from 3

and office space, a 200-room hotel, a 14-screen movie theater and 360 units of multi-family housing.

Additional acreage would be located next to the existing plot, which was recently certified organic. It takes at least three years without pesticide applications and lots of paperwork for land to gain organic certification, said Sajeemas Pasakdee, a soil scientist

with the California Agricultural Technology Institute at Fresno State. This summer, the plot produced limited amounts of organic bell peppers, green beans and zucchini that were sold at the school's farm market.

With expanded acreage, the farm could plant additional vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower and lettuce, Pasakdee said. In addition, the grant would help maintain operation of the school's organically certified greenhouse, which produces herbs and vegetable seedlings currently available for sale at the farm market.

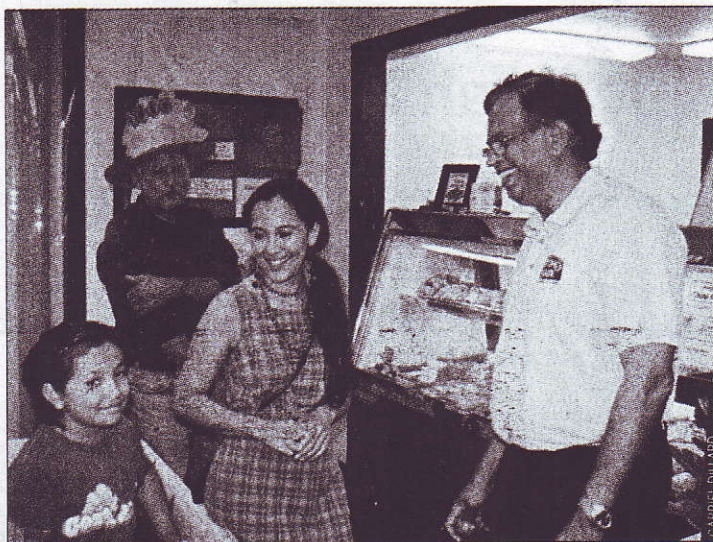
"This grant is invaluable to us," Pasakdee said.

Srinivasan said part of the initiative would involve educating students on how to apply for organic certification. This means maintaining detailed records of what inputs are used to grow crops.

This part of the business can often be daunting. "Paperwork scares some farmers," Srinivasan said.

The local chapter of California Certified Organic Farmers is contributing \$2,500 toward an internship program for students to work with organic farmers. The USDA grant will also help establish the program. Two students are expected to participate this year.

The roots of Fresno State's organic planning go back to 2004, when the certification process began. Pasakdee taught the university's first organic plant science class last spring with 20 students. As part of the class, students took a field trip to visit local organic farmers to learn about their



Ganesan Srinivasan speaks with student Alida Espinoza and her family at the farm market at Fresno State. Espinoza, who lives near campus, supports Fresno State expanding its organic offerings.

BY THE NUMBERS:

- \$60.4 million in revenues for organic farming in Fresno County in 2007.
- 133 organically certified farms in Fresno County.
- 22,986 acres of organic farmland in Fresno County.
- 1,011 acres of conventional agricultural land at Fresno State farm.
- 0.8 acres of organic farmland at Fresno State farm.
- 189.6 million pounds of pesticides applied on California farms in 2006.
- The U.S. ranks fourth in terms of certified organic acreage behind Australia, China and Argentina.

operations.

In addition to vocal demand from students and customers

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Ganesan Srinivasan,
Director of university farm operations,
California State University, Fresno

at the farm market, University Dining Services has expressed interest in serving organic products

in the school's student dining hall, Srinivasan said.

Fresno State health science student Alida Espinoza said her parents were involved in the farmworker movement. They experienced first-hand how pesticides could make farm laborers sick, she said. Espinoza said she's glad to see the university moving in the direction of organics from a personal and consumer viewpoint.

"I live by the campus," Espinoza said. "I would love to see Fresno State go organic."

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