

Chinese interested in California produce

By Donna Jones, Santa Cruz Sentinel

WATSONVILLE – Cathy Calfo couldn't help but be impressed by the wholesale produce market in Guangzhou, China, with its 40,000 workers, hundreds of trucks, and "unimaginable" quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables changing hands in all-cash transactions.

Calfo, executive director and chief executive officer of Santa Cruz-based California Certified Organic Farmers, toured the market as part of a state trade delegation to China. The delegation, led by Gov. Jerry Brown, spent April 9-15 promoting California products and learning about the massive Chinese market.

"You can't imagine the energy and activity there," Calfo said of the Guangzhou market, though she may well have been referencing the country at large. She was struck overall by the "numbers of people, the pace of growth, the diversity of methods employed to produce energy, to produce housing, to produce food."

So many cranes topped high-rises under construction in Shanghai, people joked that they were the national bird, she said. Nearby, the group visited an island with a deep water port. A 14-mile road lined with windmills linked the island to the mainland. Construction of the complex took just three years.

"You visit a market like China, and it's so huge that you see more and more opportunity," she said.

That's not to say Calfo didn't notice the downside of crowding millions of people into urban areas, especially after

experiencing the much publicized poor air quality.

But the trip, well-organized by state officials, was productive, Calfo said. The 75-member delegation reflected California's economy, with representatives from technology, tourism, real estate, clean energy and agriculture. The agricultural group was similarly diverse, with representatives from dairy and cattle industries, raisin, nut and citrus growers, wine producers, Driscoll's Berries, and organic as well as conventional farmers.

For Calfo, it was an opportunity to learn more about reaching Chinese consumers and making the contacts that could help CCOF's members enter the vast market.

The delegation met with government officials, toured grocery stores and talked to entrepreneurs, including a group of young online marketers who are developing a home food delivery business in Beijing and already had signed up 300,000 subscribers. The scale, she said, was amazing.

"Everywhere I went, there was a keen interest in California products, organic in particular," Calfo said. "People were anxious to talk about food, food safety and the availability of good healthy food, both grown and produced in China and also that could be exported to China."