

Businesses explore fair trade options

by Chris DeVille

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When goods are not available locally, several Athens businesses concerned with socially conscious, sustainable practices turn to imports that have been certified as "fair trade."

Donkey Coffee and Espresso, 17 1/2 W. Washington St., stocks locally produced baked goods, but its main source of income, coffee products, is not grown in this region. That is where global social justice comes into play.

"Justice is everybody having the same opportunity and starting place," the same resources, owner Chris Pyle said. "Fair trade plays into that."

The shop stocks only beans that have been certified as "fair trade" by a non-government organization called the Fairtrade Labeling Organization. Donkey gets its beans from distributor Dean's Beans in Orange, Mass., which only buys from farms registered with the fair trade organization.

According to Dean's Beans owner Dean Cycon, the organization works with registered farmers to set the businesses up as democratic cooperatives. The fair trade-affiliated distributors guarantee the farmers a price for the crops that will make fair wages and conditions affordable.

Cycon said the fair trade organization "visit(s) the farms and

look(s) at the books. And I also do that independently... then I open my books to them," to ensure everyone is keeping the deal.

"The price of coffee is at an all-time historic low in the 100 years that it's been watched as commodity. As a result, the coffee farmers are receiving a price that is well below the price of production," Cycon said, adding that many coffee farmers are losing jobs and land, and their children are becoming malnourished. "If you're not paying a fair trade price, you're participating in the shredding of those communities."

Other businesses such as Casa Nueva, 4 W. State St., and the Village Bakery and Café, 270 E. State St., stock fair trade coffee.

Ohio University economics professor Khosrow Doroodian said it is unwise to assume work conditions and wages on a farm are poor just because the farm is not registered with the Fairtrade Labeling Organization.

"I've been to a lot of farms that aren't involved in fair trade, and certainly many of them are fine, and many of them are abysmal," Cycon said.

Doroodian also said based on purely economic concerns, the fair trade system is not a good decision. But, "If you want to add other factors like (social concerns), it makes sense," he said.

"I think most people who come into Donkey don't mind paying extra for (fair trade goods)," Pyle said. "It's definitely worth it. You don't feel like you're ripping people off at the end of the day."