

## Sustainable Ag Endorsed

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SALEM – The Oregon Department of Agriculture has submitted a sustainability plan that endorses certifying agricultural practices as sustainable, but stops short of calling for growers to get certified.

The plan calls for the department to assist growers in developing sustainable agricultural practices and in obtaining certification. But the report stresses that certification remain voluntary.

“Many producers are wary of government’s development of sustainability plans, fearing that voluntary standards will eventually lead towards new regulations,” the report states. “Voluntary programs need to remain voluntary.”

The ODA’s sustainability plan was developed under a directive from Gov. Ted Kulongoski, who created a nine-member Sustainability Board through executive order shortly after taking office. First order of business for the board was to call for state agencies to submit sustainability plans.

The report, which was endorsed by the Oregon Board of Agriculture, defines sustainable agriculture as practices that are economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible.

“Managed properly, agriculture plays a pivotal role in a healthy ecosystem,” orchardist and agricultural board member Ken Bailey wrote in the introduction. “With the creation of Gov. Kulongoski’s executive order on sustainability, now is an ideal opportunity for Oregon’s agricultural industry to step forward and demonstrate its commitment to the economy, environment and community of our state.”

“In partnership with others,” Bailey wrote, “let’s recognize and encourage efforts in sustainability, including those in voluntary certification programs.”

Several facets of agricultural production are included in the multi-page plan, including a call for the state to resolve its farm labor concerns.

“Frequent stories in the media feature the conditions of farmworkers and draw great attention from around the state. Agriculture’s well-being depends on this issue being handled successfully and soon,” the report states.

The report also supports organic agriculture, noting that it “should be recognized and promoted as one form – though not the only form – of sustainable agriculture.”

The report stops short of taking a stance on biotechnology, noting that it can be defined in “significantly different ways” and could “threaten the good efforts of those supporting sustainable agriculture in Oregon.”

Also in the report, the ODA acknowledges that sustainability is a moving target in Oregon’s diverse agricultural climate.

“There are those who disagree with efforts in sustainability that attempt a blanket and prescriptive approach across all crops and locations,” the report states. “These are seen to ignore the diversity of Oregon’s 200-plus commodities as well as the complexity of managing across many different ecological needs.”

The report provides brief descriptions on several certification programs, including Food Alliance, Oregon Tilth and the department’s own Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices. It also encourages use of integrated pest management – production practices that are designed to help growers mitigate the threat of crop damage while minimizing the effect to environmental and human health.

John Szczepanski, the ODA assistant director who is spearheading the department’s sustainability work, said the report could eventually form the backbone of a brand Oregon marketing campaign. To date, however, the department has no plans to use the sustainability program in its marketing efforts.

Bailey, of Orchard View Farms in The Dalles, Ore., said, however, efforts to promote sustainable agricultural practices could be used by growers in private marketing campaigns.

“I think it will help growers get comfortable with marketing what they have here and take advantage of the sustainability already being done here,” he said. “We just need to promote it better.”

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