

Be careful who defines sustainable agriculture movement

Nothing will be gained jumping on a train headed down the wrong track

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Guest Comment

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In 2007, a for-profit company named Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) launched an effort to develop a uniform national standard defining "sustainable agriculture" for marketing purposes.

I do not believe this effort serves the sustainable agriculture movement. And a growing number of people and organizations agree - including diverse interests like sustainability innovators the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission and the more conventional Western Growers and American Farm Bureau.

But some remain torn. They don't want to legitimize SCS's effort, but fear the results if they don't participate. They should walk away. There is nothing to be gained jumping on a train headed down the wrong track.

SCS's process has been rocky from the start. SCS announced its initiative by publishing a draft certification standard. In it, they acknowledge drawing on work by other organizations active in sustainable agriculture, including non-profits like Rainforest Alliance, Protected Harvest and my organization - Food Alliance. Let's be clear. Food Alliance is not a participant in this effort. Our notice of it was a press release, which led us to find our name printed on SCS's documents.

The bigger problem, though, is that trying to define "sustainable agriculture" at the national level, now and for all time, threatens to undermine the very meaning and emerging value of this term.

I also believe that any "sustainability" certification program should be voluntary, providing growers and processors a tool to differentiate and add value to products. Standards should not be written simply to serve retail or regulatory interests and imposed on growers without accompanying market rewards.

Food Alliance believes "sustainable agriculture" is about the ability to produce safe, healthy, delicious,

and affordable food to meet world needs without degrading agricultural lands, quality of life in our communities, or the resiliency of the broader ecosystems on which we all depend. We want to move discussion beyond the prohibitions on synthetic pesticides and fertilizers in organic certification and think holistically about management that leads to best possible outcomes for consumers, farmers, laborers, farm animals and the land.

Food Alliance has been certifying farms and ranches for socially and environmentally responsible agricultural practices for more than a decade. We are the only certifier with social and environmental standards for food processing and distribution facilities.

But I would not presume to define "sustainable" at the national level for agriculture and the food industry.

"Sustainable" is a moving target. Science is advancing. Industry standards and practices are changing. The regulatory framework and consumer concerns are evolving. At its heart, "sustainable" means we can always do better.

As the concept of sustainability has gained currency, businesses have responded with a flood of creativity innovating to achieve social and environmental goals and making a wide variety of management improvements.

That innovation is the strength of sustainability as a business principle. And that is exactly what will be lost if SCS succeeds in defining "sustainable agriculture" as a marketing term for every food and farm business in America.

Consumers are asking more questions about where their food comes from and how it is produced. Research is clear that customers want high quality foods that fit their values and come with a story connecting them with the people and the land.

They want stories that include health, authenticity, artisan craftsmanship, and social and environmental responsibility. The demand for such products currently outstrips the supply, making the situation ripe for greenwashing - for empty claims - for fast, easy and cheap assurances that minimal standards have been met. Consumers deserve better. We all deserve better.

But the question is not how we limit the definition of sustainability so businesses can market so-called "sustainable" products.

It's how to ensure that the many initiatives now under way in the name of sustainability are marketed credibly and move our collective understanding of sustainability forward. Ultimately, "sustainable" is a question for history to judge. SCS does not have the answer, and the process they have initiated will not deliver it. Let's not invest time and energy in a one-size-fits-all national definition of sustainability that will be outdated almost as quickly as it is introduced.

Instead, let's educate all concerned that, at a minimum, any sustainability claim must meet three criteria: traceability, transparency and accountability.

Can we trace the product to the source?

Are there meaningful standards for the product?

And, is there independent, third-party verification that the product met those standards?

With these simple criteria in place, consumers can be confident they are supporting farmers, ranchers, food processors and distributors with integrity and real commitment to environmental stewardship and to the health and well being of their customers and communities.

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