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## Sustainable practices, certification gain ground

*Organic production can't meet current demand, sustainable ag expo speaker says*

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Is a farm or ranch sustainable just because it's been around awhile?

Sustainable agriculture certifier David Visher said, rather than define sustainability, think about the values included in sustainability that are important to agriculture. Visher, program manager for Portland, Ore.-based Food Alliance, said the outcomes of a food production system - clean air, clean water, fair employment are what defines its sustainability.

Visher, a speaker at the fourth annual Sustainable Ag Expo held last week in Monterey, said a definition of sustainability isn't useful.

"Sustainability is an amorphous concept. If you're going to try and define it before you address the values, it won't work," Visher said.

In a seminar on sustainable certification programs, Visher was joined by Daniel Sonke of SureHarvest, a company that assists growers in carrying out sustainable farming practices.

Sonke said sustainability is really about good business and farming practices. Looking only at productivity, growers can overlook sustainable practices in areas such as energy efficiency that could reduce their operating costs.

Organic has been a key word for consumers, but Sonke said organic production can't meet current demand. Certified sustainably grown products are gaining consumer confidence, and more companies are seeking the third-party verification of sustainable practices by producers who are supplying them.

There is a wide range of practices from choosing less toxic pesticides, to irrigation methods that keep fertilizer from running off into waterways to reducing energy use.

Visher, who works with California farmers and ranchers on certification, said the certification could be one way for family farms to stay competitive. Often they don't have a way to survive at their present size, but using a certified sustainable label on their products could add to their value.

More than 300 farms and ranches in 24 states have been certified sustainable by Food Alliance.

Visher said the labels earned by certification are credible when they are verifiable, consistent, open to public scrutiny and independent. Other benefits of sustainable certification include customer loyalty, access to new markets, improving community relations, managing environmental risks and managing regulatory risks.

The voluntary certification process for a farm involves an inspection, setting improvement goals and an audit. The company can grant certification or deny based on the audit. Farms and ranches pay annual fees based on the previous year's gross sales of the products certified.

For the first \$175,000 the fee is .5 percent or a minimum of \$400. For up to \$300,000 the fee is .25 percent and for over that amount the fee is .10 percent.

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