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Sustainable Ag Standards Initiative in Progress

Pennsylvania Sustainable Ag Leader Raises Questions About Movement

Submitted by Editor on Fri, 10/10/2008

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The words “sustainability” and “sustainable agriculture” are used more and more often by consumers, but the meaning of the phrase is not always clear.

Driven in part by retailers’ and producers’ desire to clarify labeling claims and production expectations — and by consumer concerns about food safety, environmental and social issues — a group met in September to negotiate what should be considered “sustainable agriculture” and to set national sustainable agriculture standards, according to a press release by the Leonardo Academy in Madison, Wis. The meeting was attended by “more than 50 representatives of U.S. agricultural production, food and clothing manufacturing, retail, government, environmental and labor organizations, academia and certification,” according to the release.

The initiative is being looked at by some who worry that the movement may water down or co-opt the meaning of sustainable agriculture.

For example, Brian Snyder, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), agrees that defining “sustainable agriculture” can go into areas such as social responsibility and humane treatment.

But Snyder, who was not part of the Leonardo Academy meeting in September, expressed concerns that the initiative may end up co-opting, or “green-washing” the idea of sustainable agriculture. For example, he said standards could be set requiring technologies that would in effect exclude small farms from being able to participate for financial reasons.

Snyder also expressed concern that as the initiative now seeks funding, it may end up competing for funding with small grassroots organizations like PASA.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Website, the term “sustainable development” became popular after it was used in a 1987 report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, and connoted the idea of “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Random House Dictionary defines “sustainable agriculture” as “any of a number of environmentally friendly farming methods that preserve an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources.”

Amanda Raster, of the Leonardo Academy, said the group will address a multiplicity of issues that “can be grouped into three categories: environmental sustainability, social and economic sustainability, and product integrity.”

According to the academy press release, some critical issues were identified early-on by the new group as they work toward a common definition of sustainability including: the relationship between organic, mainstream, and sustainable agriculture; the place of genetically engineered crops; inclusion of small and mid-size farms; labor protections; sequestration of carbon in soils; and the intersection of product safety and sustainability.

The standard-setting process in Madison is being guided by Scientific Certification Systems (SCS), an organization that provides third-party certification, auditing and testing, and it will follow the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) rules for setting standards.

Although the process is in the early stages, one likely outcome might be labeling and product branding. Linda Brown, SCS co-founder and vice president, said that their standard-setting process focuses on transparency, and that though it is not an easy process, they hope to arrive at a flexible, voluntary national standard.

The 50-plus “voting” Standard Committee members, who were selected from a pool of 200 applicants, read like a who’s who of food, from big companies like Kellogg and General Mills to the American Soybean Association, National Corn Growers Association, Western Growers, California Seed Association, Wegmans Food Markets, Driscolls and the Rodale Institute, for instance.

The group’s goals are not without controversy. For instance, a voluntary, “top-down” standard for sustainable agriculture, such as the one proposed by the group may become too broad to be effective or enforceable.

Although the academy press release said this is the “first” national sustainable agriculture standard setting, a number of groups already exist who have developed successful sustainable agriculture standards, certification processes for these standards, and labeling for consumers.

For example, the Portland, Ore.-based Food Alliance already certifies growers, processors, and handlers on more than 5 million acres in 18 states in the U.S., Canada and Mexico and “the number of Food Alliance certified farms and ranches has grown by 23 percent annually from 2002-2007” says a statement released by its Executive Director Scott Exo. Exo also said that the Food Alliance is not participating in the SCS process, despite having its own published certification standards consulted by the SCS group
