

The Oregonian

Role of 'sustainability' in Oregon food production

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Scott Exo is one of those people who wakes up in the morning wondering about the state of sustainability in Oregon and across the country.

Exo is the executive director of Food Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit organization with a mission to encourage sustainable agricultural practices in the items that ultimately end up on your dinner plate.

The group certifies about 300 farms and ranches in 19 states, including such products as Country Natural Beef, known for being an Oregon leader in sustainable meats.

Last week, the co-op of 120 family ranches got caught between two sides in a dispute at a feedlot in Boardman. The United Farm Workers is organizing 80 workers at Beef Northwest. Union organizers and company management haven't agreed on how to proceed with a vote by workers.

We catch up with Exo, who has worked on sustainable food issues for nine years, for his views on the state of sustainability in Oregon.

His answers have been edited for length and clarity.

We hear lots of claims about companies and products being sustainable. What does that mean?

"Sustainable" is a challenging word because there is a natural impulse by consumers and the industry to create categories. "Sustainable," unlike "organic," is not an end state, but a set of processes. In agriculture, our view of sustainability is safe, healthy and affordable food that doesn't degrade land resources or the quality of life in communities.

The most common definition of sustainability is built on three subcomponents: economic, social and environmental considerations. Farms and ranches that fit this provide safe and fair working conditions, ensure healthy and humane treatment of animals and to reduce toxicity and pesticide use on the environment as much as possible. For value reasons, we also don't tolerate

hormones, nontherapeutic antibiotics and genetically modified organisms.

How do you define social responsibility in agriculture? What does that mean in terms of practices regarding workers on the farm?

The cornerstone to social responsibility on the farm is safety and fairness. That could be clear communication with employees, training, and a process to handle grievances. We're looking for policies that protect workers from retaliation, policies that keep children out of the workplace, good training and equipment so the workers can do their jobs. Do they have health benefits or a profit-sharing plan? Do they provide housing? We're looking to ensure that workers get paid at least minimum wage and have an opportunity to exceed minimum compensation.

What drives the business interest in sustainability?

There's a rapidly rising expectation from consumers and investors in traceability, transparency and accountability. Can they identify the track all the way from farm to table? There's been a lot of education by the mainstream media about the nasty underbelly of the food system. The beef recall recently, the spinach recall before that, the Jack in the Box crisis going back 10 to 12 years. People are also expecting that businesses have to be part of the solution rather than the problem. So, businesses are trying to be more transparent because consumers are demanding it. It's an evolution. Historically, consumers have been more concerned with traditional issues: sanitation and safety. Now, we're expanding the net of values.

How do people know if there's any substance to sustainability claims?

Lots of companies now use it as a marketing tool. But independent, third-party verification really is the only way for people to know if there is anything behind the claims. People ask me a lot, "Aren't you worried about the explosion of product claims? Aren't you worried that consumers are going to get confused?" I think there is some danger in confusion, but you can reduce that if you have a clear, transparent standard. And you have to ask who is backing that claim. Is it the company itself? An industry group of which the company is a member? Or is it an independent third party which is removed from the entity and provides the most credibility?

Do you have any comment on the conflict with Beef Northwest, the United Farm Workers and Country Natural Beef?

I think the conflict at its root is primarily a failure of trust. It's patently obvious that we need a legal framework that provides a fair process for representation. Farmworkers are among the most marginalized and vulnerable people. There's no doubt about that. No one's arguing against union representation, if the workers want it. But no one really knows whether they want it or not. There's no legally binding process to determine that. It's not enough for governors to facilitate two sides coming together, anymore than it's acceptable for legislators to take sides. We desperately need some political leadership on this issue. It's long overdue.

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