



Oregon Association of Nurseries looks at sustainable certification

Retailers already seeking information on suppliers' carbon footprint

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WILSONVILLE, Ore. - The Oregon Association of Nurseries is partnering with the Oregon Environmental Council on a project that could reap dividends for Oregon nurseries.

Called the Climate Friendly Nursery Project, the project aims to provide the industry information on the benefits and costs associated with sustainable certification, as well as what it takes to get certified.

OAN executives also hope the project attracts certifiers to work with the industry.

"We want to create interest and maybe competition among certifiers to serve our industry," OAN Executive Director John Aguirre said.

At the very least, Aguirre believes the task force will provide producers information on how to become more sustainable - information that could provide production savings.

"We think as growers serve the interest of a better environment and better communities that they can adopt practices that will make them more efficient," Aguirre said.

"Maybe some will want to be certified, while others won't," Aguirre said. "But all will have access to information on how to do a better job."

The decision to look into sustainable certification was hatched last fall by the association's board of directors.

The project is funded in part by a \$50,000 federal specialty crop grant.

The association brought in the Oregon Environmental Council in part because of the council's knowledge of sustainable certification and in part because the council gives the program credibility.

"When you have a partner like the Oregon Environmental Council, that speaks on the face of it as being credible; that this is a substantive thing," Aguirre said.

Initial goals of the task force, which met for the first time July 16, are to develop a definition of sustainable production, identify principles behind the definition and convert that to a foundation nurseries can adopt.

The task force plans to bring in representatives from other agricultural industries who have moved forward with sustainable certification, such as former Norpac Foods executive Rick Jacobson and Ted Farthing of the Oregon Wine Institute.

Scott Exo, executive director of the food-production certifier Food Alliance, said it should benefit OAN to move forward with the program. Retailers already are asking suppliers about their carbon footprint, he said, and the nursery industry won't be immune to those questions.

"Those who do it proactively are the ones who are going to gain market share," Exo said.

Aguirre said the industry already has fielded questions from East Coast retailers asking whether it is sustainable to buy product from the West Coast.

The answer, Aguirre said, is more complex than it appears.

"On the surface, it seems that maybe it is better from an environmental perspective to buy from next door than from a distant market," Aguirre said. "But under the surface, it's more complex: if we can bring a product to market two years before an East Coast grower; if we utilize more hydro for electricity than say a Georgia grower who is very coal dependent; if the relative lack of pest and disease pressure means that we need less pesticides and maybe we need fewer fertilizers. There might be a combination of factors on top of not having to heat our greenhouses as much as say a grower in Michigan or Minnesota.

"You look at all those things and you might say, well, actually, our carbon footprint is much lower.

"But first we need to understand where we are in terms of our carbon footprint."

To date, Aguirre said, no company performs sustainable certification for nurseries.

Salmon Safe will certify if nursery production is safe for salmon, but the certification doesn't address labor or other issues that fall under the umbrella of sustainable certification.

Developing sustainable standards for nursery production will take into account some overarching principles, Aguirre said. After that, standards will need to be developed to address concerns specific to container, field-grown products and other sectors of the industry.

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