

What are the Ingredients of a Sustainable Food System?

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A week of intense exploration of sustainability left some with more questions to answer.



After a week of debate and discussion at the [Oregon Sustainability Experience](#) (OSE), a gentleman approached with an answer I had long awaited. He leaned in and cut through the louder talk around the room. He said, “A friend of mine has a good definition of sustainability. He says, ‘Enough for everyone forever.’” Upon hearing those four words I could not help but smile. That’s it. That is the meaning of the word of a week devoted to exploring the value of sustainable agriculture. This small moment had brought meaning to all the places I had seen and the people I had met.

OSE fulfills the title’s expectation. The week-long conference led 30 ‘food-minded’ people across the roads of western Oregon to Portland, Corvallis, Salem and many smaller towns throughout the Willamette Valley. Each day we boarded a tour bus and traversed the urban and rural communities to meet the people behind sustainable agriculture in a state that leads the nation on this issue. In Oregon, a state on the progressive edge of sustainable food production, many of the businesses we encountered were owned and operated by families - the stewards of the land, protectors of future generations.

“Sustainability” like “organic,” implies a profound shift in the way food is produced. However, similar to other trends in the food movement, it feels like another meaningful idea that’s been made vapid by industry’s desire to sell a new product.

Take for example, [Truitt Bros, Inc.](#) This 37-year-old, family-owned Salem company has three processing facilities in Oregon and one in Kentucky. Its packaged and canned food products are shipped to retailers across the nation. The reach of the company is admirable but arguably, unsustainable. I find it hard to claim such products are “sustainable,” because I believe that the age of cheap oil that subsidizes this kind of flow of goods is coming to an end.

Let me step back for a moment and ask the question that bothered me all week, ‘Are we trying to sustain the global economy? Or are we moving toward a localized food economy that can be sustained?’ Truitt Bros purchases the majority of its produce from farms around Oregon. All of the farms meet the broad yet significant standards of [Food Alliance Certification](#), as do the processing facilities of Truitt Bros itself. At the same time, considering the concept of peak oil, shipping food from one end of our nation to the other is a clearly unsustainable business model. Hence, my concern with the idea of a company such as Truitt Brothers marketing ‘sustainable products.’

The current system is flawed. No doubt about it. But we’ve brought a new ideal, a new vision into the means of production and the interests of the consumer. If we are to claim sustainably produced, distributed and sold products, we must recognize the true cost of food, its production and its transportation.

Though I may feel more conflicted than before, I’m thankful for the critical mindset OSE provided. To ensure that there is enough for everyone forever, we must embrace all pieces of the food system in the meals we eat and share with one another.

Jared Goodman is a food educator, writer and consultant living in Portland, OR. As a food activist, Jared teaches low-income families how to think critically of the food system, he [blogs](#) about the politics of food and consults households on how to afford food that is healthy for the family and the planet. He can be reached at jared@goodmaneats.com.