

Valley farms see future in sustainable ag Grocery chains ask growers to focus on long-term benefits.

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By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

Veteran west-side farmer John Diener has always felt confident in his ability to grow quality tomatoes, almonds and wheat -- but to some, that may not be good enough.

Responding to consumer sentiments, grocery-chain buyers are pushing Diener and other farmers to show they practice "sustainable" agriculture -- a popular if still fuzzy concept.

While similar to organic farming, its focus is broader: In contrast to conventional farming, sustainable agriculture puts greater emphasis on practices that have long-term benefits. For example, instead of using harsh chemicals, some farmers rely on parasitic insects to battle bad bugs. Or they use renewable energy rather than fossil fuels. Others work on improving the standard of living for farmworkers, ensuring a more productive and stable labor force.

The goal of sustainability is to reduce farming's impact on the environment while ensuring a future for agriculture.

And while some may disagree with how it is defined and measured, one thing is clear: "Sustainability" is changing how farmers do business.

Walmart, the world's largest retailer, announced on Oct. 14 a global plan to train 1 million farmers and workers on crop selection and sustainable-farming practices, including using water, pesticides and fertilizer more efficiently.

It's not alone. Sysco -- a global supplier of food to commercial kitchens -- has a sustainable-farming program, as does Del Monte Foods.

"This is not an issue that is going away, and it's one that more retailers will likely adopt," said Gail Feenstra, food system coordinator with the Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program at UC Davis. "It is best that farmers get out ahead of the game to the extent that they can."

Feenstra said climate change and high energy costs have caused retailers to take a harder look at how they do business, including their supply chain.

"The sustainability of their own operations relies on them getting products from farmers," Feenstra said. "And that isn't going to happen if the soil and air are contaminated."

Others suggest that the drive for sustainability is also fueled by the demands of Wall Street.

"If you look at the Fortune 500 companies, they are responding to consumer pressures and global pressures for resources," said Barbara Meister, marketing manager for SureHarvest, a company that provides sustainability solutions such as software and certification. "And they are responding to their stockholders who are asking about how a company is doing in the way of treatment of workers, its carbon emissions and use of water."

Making the grade

Diener's Red Rock Ranch in Firebaugh grows certified sustainable tomatoes that he sells to processor Tomatek.

That means his farm is audited once a year by Food Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit certification group.

Inspectors verify Diener's farming practices.

He gets points for using water-saving irrigation equipment, applying fewer pesticides and providing his 20 employees with health insurance and a retirement plan.

At the end of the inspection, he either passes or he fails.

"It is like going to school," Diener said. "And as long as I get something better than a C, I am OK."

Putting up with this kind of scrutiny has become part of doing business for Diener, whom many consider a progressive farmer.

"You could say that you don't want to go through something like this," Diener said. "But then who will you sell to? In some cases, we don't have a choice."

Advocates of sustainability say much work remains in the sustainable farming movement, including establishing a national standard like one that exists for organic food.

But creating such a standard could take years. In the meantime, retailers and industry groups are coming up with their own definitions and measurement tools.

Food Alliance is among a handful of organizations that provide verification of sustainable-farming practices as defined by university research.

The nonprofit group uses a third-party auditing firm for farm and factory inspections.

It works for more than 360 farms and ranches, covering 6.5 million acres in 24 states. It also has certified 35 food packing and processing plants.

"One of our biggest concerns is that as this starts to percolate in the industry, how do you ensure that the sustainability claims being made are credible?" said Matthew Buck, assistant director of Food Alliance. "A company can make a claim that they are eco-friendly based on a standard that may not be very clear."

Industry groups -- including the Almond Board of California, the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance and Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission -- are working with their members on sustainable-farming programs.

The produce industry also has launched the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops, which is intended to help growers measure their sustainability performance.

The organizations help educate growers about sustainable-agriculture practices such as how to use fewer pesticides, save water and reduce farm pollution.

Overcoming obstacles

But industry leaders admit that the path to sustainability is not smooth.

Growers may be slow to jump on board if the practices add to their time and production costs, without an immediate financial return.

The Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission now has about 23,000 acres in its sustainability program, up from 15,000 acres last year.

Mark Chandler, executive director of the commission, said that figure would be higher if not for two major roadblocks: the \$2,000 cost of certification, and the need for detailed paperwork.

"Some just don't want to go through the hassle of writing up a plan, and others don't like the cost," Chandler said.

So far, only two wineries in the region pay growers a bonus for being certified by a third-party auditor.

Modesto tree fruit farmer Paul Van Konynenburg isn't sure what the future of sustainable farming will look like. All he knows is that much has changed in the 20 years he has been farming apples, cherries, peaches and apricots.

"We are dealing in a whole new world now, where we have things like sustainability audits," Van Konynenburg said. "And if a Walmart or Costco or Safeway say you have to have it, you say, 'Yes sir.' "

But Van Konynenburg said that may not be such a bad thing, "because what this comes down to for me is giving the consumer something they can trust. And that is going to benefit all of us."

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2010/10/24/2130760/farmers-future-in-sustainability.html>