



Sustainable Food Choices: Purchasing and Policy Solutions

**Written by Matt Buck, assistant director of Food Alliance
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Businesses and institutions throughout the US are thinking more seriously about how to manage social and environmental concerns in their supply chains. This can be seen in the large number of universities, colleges and hospitals that have launched local and sustainable purchasing initiatives. Adoption of a sustainable food purchasing policy is an important next step that provides a framework for justifying and maximizing the benefits of such initiatives.

A successful sustainable food purchasing policy will be fully integrated with the goals and objectives of the business or institution. It will clearly identify social and environmental concerns, identify procurement priorities and strategies, and commit resources to those strategies. It will also set targets and timelines, and establish means for evaluating progress and making course corrections.

Sustainability commitments ultimately have to be reflected in guidelines and specifications provided to purchasers. Purchasing staff will have to request information from providers, including wholesalers, food processors or even farmers and ranchers, about the origin and nature of products. Information and claims about those products will have to be evaluated to categorize and qualify purchases.

It is critical to develop clear, operational definitions for any terms that will have bearing in solicitations for supply contracts or in routine purchasing. Terms that may need definition include: "sustainable," "socially responsible," "environmentally responsible," "fair," local," or "humane."

Make sure that definitions of terms are practical, with both clear criteria and a feasible means for determining compliance with the stated standard. It may also be valuable to establish a means to measure progress against a scaled standard so that superior performance by contractors and vendors can be recognized and rewarded.

A number of companies are making efforts to differentiate their food products based on social and environmental claims, or on specific product claims such as "hormone free." Be careful. Some product claims have no standard industry definitions and practices may vary depending on the supplier. Others, like "natural," have a standard industry definition, but are so weak as to be essentially meaningless.

Verification of compliance is a critical issue. Once standards have been established, and terms defined, the policy must be clear what constitutes adequate demonstration of compliance.

There are typically three means for establishing compliance:

- First-party claims—usually a statement made by the producer, sometimes with a signed affidavit;
- Second-party claims—often a statement by an industry association on behalf of a group of growers/manufacturers, or by a business intermediary on behalf of a sub-supplier;
- Third-party certification—an independent inspection to verify product claims.

Third-party certification provides the highest degree of confidence that standards have been met. Third-party certifications for food products include: USDA Organic, Food Alliance, Certified Humane, and the Marine Stewardship Council.

Visit www.greenerchoices.org for Consumer Reports evaluations of labels and claims.

Visit www.SustainableFoodPolicy.org for more information about sustainable food purchasing policies.