

Now is the Time to Define Sustainability in Agriculture

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Today we hear the word “sustainability” regularly. While the term sounds like a positive, proactive move for both industry and the environment many have asked: What does this mean for agriculture? The Grower-Shipper Association, in partnership with local farm bureaus and other agriculturalists has been regularly meeting to discuss this very question. A process for defining sustainability has been proposed by Scientific Certification Systems, a third-party certifier. While participating in a national movement to define sustainability presents a great opportunity for our industry to demonstrate our philanthropic spirit and environmental stewardship, we have concerns with the process that’s already taken place in creating draft standards and the proposed course of action for finalizing these standards. In their current form these draft standards would be impossible for almost every grower in our valley to meet.

The definition of sustainability is not concrete; therefore we and many other organizations are working to create a strong characterization of sustainable growing, shipping and processing practices. In its simplest form sustainability in agriculture finds balance between social responsibility, environmental stewardship and economic feasibility.

The members of the Grower-Shipper Association are dedicated to being a part of this movement because these simple definitions of sustainability are already inherent to what it means to be a grower and shipper of crops on the central coast. The local agricultural community supports a number of non-profit organizations dedicated to the betterment of society, such as Ag Against Hunger and HELP: Healthy Eating Lifestyle Principles; educational institutions such as California State University Monterey Bay and Hartnell College; and organizations that educate our community about agriculture, such as Monterey County Ag Education. The National Steinbeck Center, (JIM! Add in here other institutions and organizations!) have been created and thrived in our community due in large part to the generosity of local agriculture.

Environmental stewardship is a practice that the local industry is committed to. Local growers have worked with the Resource Conservation District for many years to control soil erosion, protect water quality, properly manage nutrient inputs, improve natural habitats and use water resources efficiently. In the state of California growers follow the most stringent laws and regulations for safe organic and conventional pesticide use, using only the pest and weed control implements that they really need in order to produce a crop that meets the high quality standards expected of our local crops.

Finally all of these things must be balanced with increased regulations and costs growers must meet in order to farm today. Diesel prices quickly rising above \$4 a gallon combined with increased costs for meeting air and water quality regulations, implementing necessary food safety practices and maintaining the many tools used on a growing operation have made farming an increasingly expensive venture over the past 20 years.

As you can imagine, taking these three core values of sustainability and creating a document by which every grower in the United States can follow is a substantial task. The current proposed process' major flaw is that it was created with no industry input. At this point we're working with a flawed document that doesn't represent the needs and problems faced by the industry and the process for making necessary changes to this document is irresolute. At this time we're debating next steps. Do we define sustainability as an industry, taking into account the three major values while balancing the quality and quantity desires of consumers, or do we try to become involved in a proposed process for defining sustainability created by an organization that has created a proposed standard with limited understanding of the specialty crop industry? This is a decision we will have to make soon, as the time to define sustainability for the industry is now.

If you're interested in learning more about what sustainability means to agriculture, a forum moderated by Salinas' Mayor Dennis Donohue and featuring Dr. Roberta Cook of UC Davis, Tim Garlarneau of UC Santa Cruz and Jeff Dlott of SureHarvest will focus on how sustainable goals and ideas translate into production practices that are socially responsible, environmentally friendly, and economically viable. To learn about this event coming up on May 30 contact Grower-Shipper at 831-422-8844.