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Pa. Association for Sustainable Agriculture partners with Food Alliance to create “sustainable ag certification”

by Dorothy Noble

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — At the [Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture](#)'s 18th annual Farming for the Future Conference, executive director Brian Snyder announced a partnership with [Food Alliance](#) for sustainable agriculture certification.

Food Alliance executive director Scott Exo pointed out that in today's markets the stakes are higher for social responsibility and environment management. He added, “People are paying more attention to the origins of their food.”

Both Exo and Snyder stressed that their initiative creates more transparency and accountability in the regional food system.

Tools needed

Snyder said, “For consumers to make free and informed choices about what kinds of foods support the health and well-being of our communities and the environment, they need a basis for evaluating marketing claims. We want to give our regional farmers a tool to differentiate their products in that retail or food service setting. And we want to give citizens a better means to separate the marketing of food from the reality of production practices.”

Exo added, “A growing number of companies are marketing ‘natural’ or ‘green’ products. But when you look closely, there's not much behind it. Consumers know that game and they are increasingly cynical. Third-party certification verifies and substantiates marketing claims. There is an objective and meaningful standard for performance. There is a credible inspection process to ensure the standard has been met. With third-party certification, you know where the product comes from and you know how it was produced. That transparency creates trust and loyalty.”

An independent nonprofit organization for more than 10 years, Food Alliance started as a project of Oregon State and Washington State universities, and the Washington State Department of Agriculture. It now has offices in Oregon, California, Minnesota and Pennsylvania and, through a third party verification process, certifies farms, ranches, food processors and distributors.

Standards span numerous concerns

Food Alliance's certification standards are specific to the type of business. For example, the standards for farms address such practices as soil and water quality, reduced pesticide usage and toxicity through integrated pest management, safe and fair working conditions, wildlife habitat protection, and healthy and humane animal treatment.

Even though a certification inspector scores an applicant by evaluating his level of compliance within each of these areas, some specific practices are prohibited. These bans include using growth hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics and genetically modified crops as well as certain pesticides.

In addition, while an applicant can be certified by demonstrating compliance with a majority of standards, he must continually improve and report the progress.

Opportunity for mid-sized farms

Although sustainable certification can benefit any size agriculture enterprise, the majority of current Food Alliance certified farms are family-scale operations, and agriculture is the sole occupation and income source for the owner.

At a time when mid-sized farms in the nation are declining — a trend which alarms many in the agriculture community — Exo said sustainable certification can provide these farms particularly with an opportunity to differentiate. Very small farms, he noted, such as those which market to community supported agriculture (CSA) ventures or farm markets, often already enjoy a close connection with their customers.

Snyder echoed this by pointing out that consumers can make more informed decisions about local foods when they have met the farmer. “That opportunity usually doesn’t exist in a retail or restaurant setting,” he added. “And we want to give our regional farmers a tool to differentiate their products in that retail or food service setting.”

Sustainable certification rising

Food Alliance has enjoyed climbing rates of certification. Frequent surveying of the customers shows satisfaction with increased market share and often premium prices. In addition, the organization has been forging relationships with commercial food buyers to increase demand for certified products.

Exo views sustainable certification as complementary to organic certification. Different markets — and different crops — can dictate which approach works best for individual farmers. Organic certification also involves a system and, if labeled as such, must be compliance with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s national organic standards.

PASA’s membership numbers close to 5,000. About two-thirds are farmers. One of the largest sustainable agriculture groups in the nation, its mission is to “promote profitable farms that produce healthy food for all people while respecting the natural environment.”

Exo said, “I am delighted with a strong and robust partner in the form of PASA. It clearly has a strong influence in the Mid-Atlantic for building better food systems and attracting large numbers of farmers. For good food in that region, we have a winning combination.”

Get the details

Food Alliance's Web site, www.foodalliance.org, contains specifics on their certification program, including the standards. Plus, the site provides farmers with an online assessment.

PASA's Web site, www.pasafarming.org, describes its programs and activities. In addition, those interested can e-mail PASA at: certification@pasafarming.org.