



## Understanding Sustainable Agriculture

By Brian Snyder, Executive Director

Several months ago I was asked to jot down some basic concepts about sustainable agriculture to help a public official who wanted to be able to talk about it intelligently. More recently, this exercise came to mind again as I, along with many of you, had to endure the Monsanto “greenwashing” campaign on National Public Radio wherein they claim to be supporting sustainable agriculture as a priority.

Since Monsanto, and many other companies by the way, are currently busy trying to misrepresent themselves as having been right there at the forefront of the sustainability movement, I thought it appropriate for us all to review what we really mean when using the term “sustainable agriculture.” Following are some of my thoughts on the subject:

### Definition of Sustainable Agriculture

First and foremost, sustainable agriculture is a philosophy or an attitude adopted by the farmer in question, usually characterized by an intention to operate the farm holistically with respect to the context in which it is situated (environment, community, etc.) and to show continuous improvement.

Ultimately, any sustainable farmer/farm is attempting to achieve the best

possible agricultural result over the longest time span imaginable. In this sense, sustainability is simply the opposite of simplistic, short-term thinking of any kind, and stands in distinct contrast to programs that, for instance, merely preserve farmland.

The technical definition of sustainable agriculture is the successful employment of farming practices that achieve three things at once, without diminishing any one of them: economic viability, environmental soundness, social responsibility.

### Key Concepts in Implementing Sustainable Practices

- **Diversity** — Nothing is more important to the practice of sustainable farming than the idea of diversity. This term is used in many different contexts, including diversity of types and locations of farms, race/ethnicity/background of farmers themselves, varieties of crops and livestock, market venues used in selling products, and so on. A lack of diversity in any of these areas often, and perhaps inevitably, leads to failure of the system as a whole. Maintaining diversity in every respect is considered the quintessential “risk management” strategy, contrasting with other strategies that rely only on conventional insurance and/or government assistance for survival.

- **Balance** — Before there was sustainable agriculture, our major land grant universities talked about “balanced agriculture.” This was really the same idea, and was itself preceded by other ideas and even folk wisdom that emphasized the importance of “common sense” over “book learning.” In the technical definition given above, one can understand that the economic, environmental, and social aspects of any farm must be in balance for the operation to be sustainable. Aside from any hazy, philosophical thinking involved, this idea has real, practical power in the everyday world. To wit, farming done merely for profit without regard to environmental impact, or for profit and environment protection without regard to social factors (like, can normal people afford to eat?) is ultimately considered irresponsible. And yet, we also understand that farming that does not keep the farmer in business financially will fail altogether. To achieve success, everything must be in balance.

- **Regeneration** — An idea that has gained traction and relevance ever since we began to acknowledge that the health of our planet and its people is in jeopardy, we now understand sustainable agriculture to involve practices that will restore health to the land and everything that depends on it. In its essence, this means we are trying to abandon a degenerative system in favor of one that will improve life as we know it indefinitely. This idea and its many variants is likely to sound disruptive, dismissive or even arrogant by others who encounter it for the first time, but then lately everyone is starting to understand just how urgent the need to change our ways in so many areas of life has become. The twenty-first century will be all about restoring health “from the ground up”...or else.

- **Continuous Improvement** — The main point to be made here is that the path taken by sustainable agriculture wherever it occurs is to be understood distinctly in contrast to the idea of “progress” or mere “technological advancement.” History does not run according to a straight arrow; our society is more aware than ever these days of the cyclical nature of many aspects of life, including politics, economics, religion and yes, even science. Proponents of sustainable agriculture love science and research as much as anyone out there, but they also understand the folly of believing that science itself leads to inevitable, uninterrupted progress. In contrast, they believe that continuous improvement in agriculture is a product of the collective wisdom of a community of common values and practice working very hard together.

- **Alignment** — There is a spiritual side of sustainable agriculture that receives more or less emphasis depending on one’s variety of faith and religious practice (another area where diversity is required). But whether an individual practitioner believes literally in creationism, intelligent design or the scientific theory of evolution, there is frequent reference made in everyday practice to the alignment of one’s methods with divine purposes, the laws of the universe or the sometimes mysterious ways of nature, almost interchangeably. This is a primary

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reason why nearly any gathering of the sustainable agriculture community includes people with extremely varied backgrounds, from the most conservative sects of farmers to some of the most highly educated practitioners of the natural and social sciences, and many folks in between. The idea of aligning our agricultural practices with “the way things are supposed to be” has a tremendously unifying effect, and leads to the enthusiasm often experienced at such gatherings.

One would need to understand the above concepts, and probably a few more, before fully comprehending the attitude of the sustainable ag community with respect to some of the major public policy issues of our day. For instance, we are much more interested in government programs that improve public access to fresh, locally grown foods, than we are in seeing government subsidies of any kind for farmers (which will seem self-evident to most readers of this column, but

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dumbfounds many public officials).

We also insist that bigger, more “efficient” farms are not the best way to “feed the world,” since such systems are inevitably doomed to failure because of the lack of diversity and imbalances they create. There are many implications for policies regarding healthcare, the economy, global warming and energy as well.

So, when I see or hear a major corporation like Monsanto using the term “sustainable agriculture,” I comfort myself with the knowledge that they have no idea what they’re really getting themselves into, i.e. a system of thinking that would naturally lead to their own demise, at least without adjustments to their busi-

ness processes and product lines.

But every time the term is used, we are afforded an opportunity to talk about what we do and reaffirm our commitment to the authentic values and practices of sustainability in agriculture. If you think about it, it’s downright generous of these big companies to use their massive marketing budgets to give us such opportunities.

Their ignorance is our gain. It’s almost as though our food system is working to balance itself that way, giving us a real shot at achieving alignment with the way things should be even more quickly than we could have imagined. ■