

Sustainability: Burden or Opportunity?

By Tim York, Markon Cooperative

Agriculture is at a crossroads. Will we regard sustainability as another burden on our unfairly maligned growers and defend our right to address resource use and management as we see fit at our own pace? Or will we leverage the movement as an opportunity to demonstrate continuous improvement and tell our story with unprecedented power and clarity?

A change in perspective may afford us a valuable opportunity. In 2005 the National Restaurant Association (NRA) issued a press release in support of legislation to block “frivolous obesity lawsuits” from targeting the food industry. The tone was defensive,

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even indignant. Two years later the NRA launched a healthy-living initiative, and in 2012 its president was recognized by the Campaign to End Obesity for being an “enthusiastic and engaged leader in the fight to reverse America’s obesity epidemic.”

What changed? In my view, the NRA and the industry it represents made a strategic decision to acknowledge public health concerns linked to restaurants. It engaged with stakeholders to address those concerns constructively instead of choosing to circle the wagons for yet another battle.



Opportunities and Challenges

We have the opportunity to do something similar with sustainability. As I see it, sustainability can be defined as an approach for optimizing economic prosperity for the farmer, optimizing our use of environmental resources and optimizing value to society. It’s an approach to doing business—not a destination or another to box to check. Many successful growers and ranchers already think and operate this way. What truly counts are the continuous steps along the way to optimization and economic success.

No doubt, where we sit in this crossroads agriculture faces some serious headwinds, including:

- A diminishing labor force
- Finite natural resources (water, soil, air, habitat)

- Availability of land for farming
- The high cost of farming and general business inputs
- Managing waste
- Expanding markets locally, regionally, nationally and globally
- Growing division between small and large, rich and poor, local versus corporate
- Replacing aging growers and others in the agri-food chain with the best and brightest for tomorrow and
- Political pressures mounting in each area.

Consumer Pressure

Although sustainability initiatives to date have been driven by business-to-business relationships, consumer demand will add fuel to the trend. As New York sociologist and Food Foresight panelist Larry Kaagan explains, many consumers think of sustainable agriculture as simply “food.” For a growing number of consumers, the most effective way to express their pro-environment beliefs is to support food providers who are—or seem to be—“doing the right thing.”

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Sound tenuous? Fair enough. But that doesn’t mean it’s not powerful. Consumers with strong opinions about food—who vote with their wallets—are not obliged to understand the science or economics behind

farming. They are even less likely, Kaagan points out, to appreciate the industry's spin on the details.

The confluence of increased pressure on agriculture, and a growing number of enthusiastically engaged (if not totally knowledgeable) consumers, presents a tremendous opportunity.

While growers don't want people telling them how to farm, they can demonstrate respect for public concerns. Even better, they can help stakeholders appreciate all of the best management practices already in place, where change is possible, where it's not, and where things can be done differently.

Sustainability is a process through which to address the pressures bulleted above and some yet to be recognized challenges. At the same time, it's a way to take clear, meaningful steps toward meeting a growing consumer demand. Done right, sustainability enables producers to measure, manage, and—this is critical—communicate authentically about their progress. Agriculture has a story to tell: multi-generational families growing food to meet the demands of increasing populations, while demonstrating continuous improvement in farming practices.

For now, both buyers and consumers seem most interested in grower-shippers recognizing and acknowledging the issue of sustainable resource use and management. Demonstrating progress of any kind puts you ahead of the field and no one is demanding perfection. There's simply not enough data out there to define that nirvana.

Years ago the restaurant industry gave up trying to defend its innocence in the obesity epidemic and the right to do things the way it had always done. It responded to a national movement with meaningful, tangible offerings. We can respond to the sustainability movement likewise—and raise the ante.

In the next issue, I'll share some ways our grower-shipper colleagues are moving forward. **ce**

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