



PASSAGE *to* SUCCESS

FARM BUREAU - CONFRONTING THE ISSUES

Sustainable Certification AFBF Policy Development May 2009

Issue: Utilization of certification methods in the market place to designate products developed or grown under “sustainable” conditions is increasing. Recognition and support of this practice has been noted in Federal legislation and by consumers. Some of these certification systems are designed specifically to generate premium pricing for those who participate. Other systems are designed to help producers address the practical application of production practices that could increase the efficiency of farm operations.

Depending on how these programs are designed and implemented, they may or may not provide revenue opportunities for agricultural and forestry producers, but could offer other benefits such as developing a set of best practices that increase producer efficiency. AFBF has no policy on such certification programs.

Background:

The word “sustainable” is the new buzz word used by environmentally and socially-conscious consumers. However, there is recognition among consumer groups, businesses, environmental advocates, policy-makers, and agro-forestry organizations that no single, recognized standard or set of standards exists for products that are “sustainably” grown or produced. Numerous organizations are willing to designate “sustainable” products by their individual guidelines or standards. These may or may not be based on sound science and may or may not adhere to a common definition of “sustainability”.

The real issue with certification systems is the motivation behind them. For instance, a given certification scheme, depending on how it’s developed and implemented can discriminate against food, fiber and forestry products produced and manufactured to current industry standards and methods that may inherently be “sustainable”.

There is debate among “sustainable” agriculture advocates whether 1) “sustainability” guidelines should be broad-based minimum standards to which all producers must adhere, or 2) “sustainability” certification should be limited to practices that go beyond “business-as-usual” and reward those individual products accordingly. The definitions of “sustainable” agriculture vary, as well. AFBF for instance holds that “there is only one constant and that is agriculture is only “sustainable” when it is profitable.” Some advocates base their views of “sustainability” from the organic movement, while others recognize the key role that conventional agricultural production will play in providing the basic necessities for growing populations. The current proliferation of certification schemes is causing havoc in the marketplace.

Several major international, and national efforts, have been launched to explore “sustainability” and certification schemes. Currently, the Leonardo Academy, a member of the American National Standards Institute (an organization that develops and coordinates the development of voluntary consensus standards in the United States), has embarked on a process to define “sustainable” agriculture. This process is working towards establishing a set of performance



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based standards for the production of food, feed and fiber. AFBF occupies a seat on the principle committee that will eventually vote for a set of certification principles for “sustainable” agriculture.

The Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture, of which AFBF is a contributor, recently released its “Field to Market” report that attempted to define “sustainability” metrics for four primary crops (corn, soybeans, wheat, and cotton) and establish a baseline for “sustainability” measurement. The report states that the environmental footprint for corn, soybeans and wheat is markedly improved. A few other competing “sustainable” certification programs are *Rainforest Alliance Certified* and *Food Alliance Certified* that are based on totally independent criteria.

Currently, there are two “sustainable” forest management and product certification systems in the U.S: a) Forest Stewardship Council – U.S. Working Group, and b) “sustainable” Forestry Initiative (SFI) of the American Forest & Paper Association. A popular use for “sustainable” wood products is in the “green” building construction. The U.S. Building Council (a not-for-profit cross-sector organization comprised of industry, government and academic representative) operates the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program to certify and rank green building methods and materials with support of the federal government and other sources. LEED’s “sustainable” wood definitions, (based on Forest Stewardship Council recommendations) have been criticized for discriminating against the use of wood products in some circumstances because it is not sufficiently “sustainable”.

Questions:

Should AFBF have policy addressing such certification schemes? Or, is it better to remain involved and monitor those activities?

What elements of agricultural production should be stressed in proposed “sustainable” agricultural standards?

What policy could AFBF enunciate that would assure broad acceptance of wood as a “sustainable”, renewable resource in building and construction? Should the LEED program provide access to all growers of wood products?

Farm Bureau Policy:

Policy 519 – Private Forestry

Lines 31-33: We urge the ruse of renewable and environmentally friendly resources such as wood and agricultural products for the construction of pallets and containers for use in shipping.