

# THE PACKER

## Opinion

# Sustainability could expand to help feed the world

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Many growers and agricultural leaders are caught in the proverbial headlights as a bullet train of diverse stakeholder opinions increasingly defines acceptable agricultural systems and food products.



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Foundations, environmental groups, public health groups, labor groups and chefs, as well as the marketplace, continue to demand change in agriculture in the name of healthier consumers, healthier animals and a healthier planet.

Demands frequently fall under the banner of sustainability, which many define as balancing the needs of people and the planet with economic viability.

The food system looms large as a major user of fossil fuels and water and a producer of greenhouse gas emissions. Several supply chain-wide initiatives made up of diverse stakeholders are developing sets of quantitative metrics that together will define how to measure sustainability.

Expect crosscutting agrifood sector metrics to emerge for energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, water use, water quality and others, including working conditions.



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These initiatives include strange bedfellows that represent broad interests that now are working together for common goals — a more profitable, people-centered and environmentally restorative food system.

Growers who can translate these goals into practical business models will create a unique competitive advantage.

There are lots of diverse stakeholders driving this discussion.

### Foundations playing a key role

Of the top 10 U.S. foundations by asset size (more than \$110 billion), eight have grant making in the areas of agriculture and the environment, food safety and nutrition to the tune of millions of dollars.

It is a certainty that foundation-funded efforts at leading environmental and public health NGOs will result in increased media attention and be used to inform public policy makers on issues of agricultural and resource use, agricultural impacts on the environment, food safety, animal welfare and nutrition, particularly related to

childhood obesity.

On the culinary front, Alice Waters, author Michael Pollan and other food celebrities are urging reforms to America's food system, suggesting that progress on the healthcare crisis, energy dependence and climate change depend on it. Their theme is consistent: Whole foods are good, processed foods are bad. They prefer small farms over large industrial or "factory" farms.

On the public health front, in 2007, the American Public Health Association called for a transformation of the food system to promote environmental sustainability, improve nutritional health and ensure social justice.

On the medical front, the American Medical Association issued a sustainable food policy this summer recommending that the healthcare food supply chain turn to sustainable food when possible.

On the federal government front, the Obama administration appears to be working on transitioning the U.S. into a green society. The administration expresses a strong interest in food and farming and the ideology behind it. Obama and the first lady are viewed as the first true foodies in the White House. They even have their own organic garden.

Local governments are engaged as well. The American Planning Association recommends building stronger, sustainable and more self-reliant local food systems. This summer, the mayor of San Francisco announced the city's first food policy aimed to ensure all regional residents have access to healthy food. Los Angeles is expected to announce a similar initiative this fall.

On the retail front, large grocery and foodservice chains and packaged goods companies continue to move down the road toward sustainability initiatives.

Sustainability initiatives at companies like Wal-Mart and Safeway focus on performance outcomes and benchmarking results.

Wal-Mart is also focusing on purchasing locally produced foods. The company is committed to bringing its local purchases up to 5% by the end of 2009 and ultimately reaching 20%. They define local as grown or produced within a state.

Interestingly, our Food Foresight trends program is picking up signals of an expansion of the sustainability discussion to feeding the world. The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council hosted a meeting in Beijing last year for 150 of the world's leading food retailers to discuss how they should be responding to the growing concern for the environment.

The meeting focused on reducing waste, reducing carbon and developing a sustainable agriculture for food for the future.

A report from the conference concludes that sustainability is a critical issue for retail because food scarcity is a real possibility in the future given the continued economic growth of developing countries like China and India, whose expanding middle class will increase the demand for, and the price of, food.

The limits on water and arable land caused by population growth, economic development and poor resource management further complicate the sustainability discussion, as does climate change.

Others believe the sustainability discussion should be expanded to feeding the planet. In a presentation earlier this year at a Farm Foundation Roundtable meeting, Robert Thompson of the University of Illinois cited data projecting that world food demand could double by 2050, with a 50% increase in world population growth (all in developing countries) and a 50% increase from broad-based economic growth in low income countries.

That's the equivalent of feeding two more Chinas without added production acreage in the U.S., because of urbanization and environmental effects. New technology will have to play a role, as will new growing regions in places like Africa and China.

All of this points to a world where successful grower business models align products and pricing to match target markets.

They may be commodity markets. They may be niche markets. In a hungry world, there's room for both.

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**What's your take on trends in environmental sustainability and the food system? Leave a comment and tell us your views.**