

Sustainable Potato Production – A Means To An End?

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The principal idea of sustainability is easily defended and can be supported in general terms by nearly all people involved in the production, processing, marketing, research, service, and consumption of agricultural commodities. The goal of increasing the sustainability of agricultural systems is noble and typically desirable by all members of the agricultural industry.

Sustain (the root word of sustainable) has multiple definitions including:

- 'to supply with food, drink, and other necessities of life'
- 'to keep in existence; maintain'
- 'to provide for (an institution or the like) by furnishing means or funds'

Based on these simple definitions, one could argue that American agriculture and the potato industry specifically has been sustainable in many ways as the nation has been provided with an abundant and safe potato supply, the potato industry continues to exist, and the marketing of potatoes have provided the means and funds for farms, processors, service industries, and other ag-businesses to survive and persist.

At the same time, few of us who work in the potato industry will admit complete satisfaction when asked if current systems are sustainable. Aspects of production, processing, management, marketing, and business systems can always be improved to increase the sustainability of agricultural systems. Solutions for advancing the sustainability of potato systems are numerous, vary by individual, and should be grounded in sound research and experimentation. Research must include complete 'lifecycle' analysis that evaluates farm and off farm business systems including processing, packaging and distribution for a complete lifecycle analysis.

General consensus argues three main components need to be considered when striving for sustainable agricultural systems. Applying these components to potato systems requires 1) development of crop management systems designed to have minimal negative effects on the environment, 2) adoption of systems that would increase profitability of potato farms, processors, and allied industries, and 3) systematic improvements that benefit society through a number of venues, including provision of a safe and adequate food supply.

Nationalized standards for sustainable agriculture have been proposed by Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) and the Keystone group. Furthermore, sustainability audits are increasingly designed and required by retailers, distributors, and food service industries. Potato and processed vegetable growers are now required to meet sustainability standards that are often unique to each individual end user.

The creation of nationalized standards and implementation of sustainability criteria by end users has been met with skepticism by numerous members of the potato industry.

There are at least 4 main concerns amidst the controversy related to nationalized sustainability standards and mandatory certification requirements or audits. These concerns are not meant to over-simplify the problem associated with this discussion, but to illustrate the challenges facing current efforts to define sustainability.

First, current efforts to define sustainability and current sustainability certification requirements are primarily focused on environmental protection. Almost all definitions of sustainability involve more than the environment. Furthermore, there is no incentive for landscape/environmental improvement in non-agricultural lands, yet such lands represent up to 50% of the land area of individual farms. Most important, there appears to be minimal concern about grower or processor profitability. In fact, meeting sustainability criteria will certainly increase production costs with few near term economic incentives or rewards for implementation of currently defined sustainability criteria other than the capability to continue to sell the crop. Increased costs without rewards will put additional pressure on the industry to concentrate as producers seek profitability by exploiting economies of scale.

Second, definition of sustainability criteria with focus on environmental protection has not been an open discussion. Rather the process of establishing such standards is occurring with little to no transparency. What is often arrived at, in fact, is a comprehensive set of beliefs unique to individual groups or certifying agencies promoting specific management practices with limited scientific basis. By definition, sustainable agricultural systems require grass roots involvement by society (consumers, NGO's, environmental groups) in order to establish acceptable and appropriately targeted sustainability standards. Just as important is the involvement of growers, processors, and allied industries in the creation of standards, but direct potato grower involvement in establishment of nationalized standards or industry defined standards has not occurred. A founding principle of our nation is that rules, standards, and laws are hammered out in a democratic process, with everyone able to contribute in a public and civil process.

Third, sustainable potato production standards need to be based on the best available science. Standards and specific management practices based on levels of social acceptability and perceived impacts on the environment are not adequate. Standards need to be formed around research-based evidence that demonstrate the sustainability of a given practice. Our concern is that proposed standards will simply "green wash" potato production, allowing companies or individuals to superficially address sustainability without realizing actual environmental, economic, or social enhancements, otherwise know as the triple bottom line.

Finally, nationalized standards are argued as a means to simplify the ability of potato and other food industries to meet the sustainability requirements of various retailers, processors, or distributors. Unfortunately, consensus regarding nationalized standards will be difficult to achieve without first identifying specific end goals with widespread acceptance. Once such goals are established, identification of specific management practices can be implemented on individual farms or targeted potato markets to meet measurable sustainability targets.

The evolution of sustainable agriculture is continuous, with new technologies and scientific understanding of systems allowing for constant progression toward a profitable and environmentally sound agriculture. Defining standards based on perceived ideals within a few production systems could severely limit the implementation and adoption of sustainable practices across the vast majority of U.S. agriculture. Conversely, loosely establishing standards that do not challenge the status quo will be transparent to consumers and threatens the social, economic, and environmental value of sustainable systems.

The Wisconsin potato industry is in a position to provide leadership in promoting sustainable potato production systems. There is a real opportunity for leadership because food crops such as potato and vegetables will be targeted with sustainability expectations earlier than grain crops. We encourage the National Potato Council (NPC) and others address the above four issues when considering sustainability standards. Are these standards going to be mandated or derived through open discussion among consumers, distributors, retailers, processors, and growers with a foundation in scientific fact.

U.S. potato production has to be sustainable – our future depends on it!!!