

## A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

# A Call to Farms



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### Defining or Redefining Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainability is one of the Rorschach type concepts that allows one to read into it many different concepts or ideas. There is the classic Bruntland Commission definition [www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm](http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm) –

sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

With respect to food and agriculture it has been defined by looking at food systems not just in the traditional sustainability spheres of economics, environment, and social activities but also health, politics and interdisciplinary academic ideas such as systems thinking (see, e.g., the work of the UC Davis Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program at <http://sarep.ucdavis.edu/about/index.htm>)

Civil society groups are also trying to define sustainability and to use it as a baseline to judge political decisions. For example, a number of European based NGOs recently launched a European Food Declaration which is largely built around their view of what the

term sustainability means ([www.europeanfooddeclaration.org/](http://www.europeanfooddeclaration.org/))

This could potentially influence the kinds of policy decisions recently outlined in scenarios for agriculture and rural development by the EU in its Scenar 2020-II study ([http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/scenar2020ii/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/scenar2020ii/index_en.htm)) The role for rural policies was one point of contention at the OECD agricultural ministers meeting on food and agriculture policies for a sustainable future with EU ministers calling for focused government programs while others such as Australia called for free market approaches ([www.oecd.org/agriculture/ministerial](http://www.oecd.org/agriculture/ministerial)) This is a topic that still bedevils the WTO agriculture talks and Doha round as well – see e.g. <http://ictsd.org/i/news/bridgesweekly/71997/>

Some political entities are acting on a very local level. For example the state of Wyoming in the US has passed what it calls a Food Freedom Act that encourages farm markets, roadside stands, and home sales. However some are concerned about this from a food safety point of view as noted by Marion Nestle ([www.foodpolitics.com/2010/02/wyomings-idea-of-food-freedom-liberty-or-safety-hazard/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2010/02/wyomings-idea-of-food-freedom-liberty-or-safety-hazard/)) An alternative view on this is that bringing consumers and producers closer together would actually increase food safety as they would build direct connections that need to rely on trust. For some discussion of these competing views see this essay [www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/03/more-or-less-food-safety-regulation/](http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/03/more-or-less-food-safety-regulation/)

A number of small scale initiatives in the San Francisco area, some of which benefit from USDA funding per the EU encouraged this approach at the OECD, as outlined on Civil Eats in this report (<http://civileats.com/2010/03/08/produce-to-the-people-collaborating-for-food-access/>) The challenges to local meat production due to lack of slaughtering facilities is explained by a USDA economist also on Civil Eats here

(<http://civileats.com/2010/03/12/considering-the-t-bone-how-does-local-meat-end-up-on-local-plates/>) A certification program intended to identify such efforts more clearly is run by the Food Alliance at <http://foodalliance.org/> Another plank in the effort to encourage more local food production is using the buying power of school lunch programs as outlined here <http://civileats.com/2010/03/23/farmer-friendly-zone-better-school-food-more-local-farms/>

Food Security is another topic that often gets mixed into the sustainability debate. For some international perspective on this topic see these firsthand reports about the food crisis that resulted after the Haiti earthquake ([www.goodeater.org/2010/02/22/why-did-the-haitian-earthquake-become-a-food-crisis/](http://www.goodeater.org/2010/02/22/why-did-the-haitian-earthquake-become-a-food-crisis/)) and ongoing work in Eastern and Southern Africa on the Millennium Development Goals (<http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/creating-game-plans-for-investment-and-policy-to-improve-food-security/>) For a refreshing take on the food security topic that steers clear of the usually us (bio/local) versus them (GM/agri-business) view of the world see this book suggestion <http://en.greenplanet.net/point-of-view/editorials/1534-between-food-safety-and-food-security.html>

Finally, another great book that tries to tie together a number of the themes around the health, environmental, social, and economic aspects of food is by Tim Lang, David Barling, and Martin Caharar. If you buy only one book this year to brush up on sustainable food and agriculture this should probably be it <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198567882.do>

All of this is to say that defining sustainability is difficult at best. One can note some attributes that it should contain and can identify some key markers. One can even make some clear goals to which it should probably try to aspire in the future (<http://civileats.com/2010/02/19/redefining-sustainable-agriculture-at-pasa/>) but setting out a clear universal definition is probably as difficult as getting one agreement on what is

in that Rorschach diagram – each person will see their own image in the end.

## News

Labeling is a topic that continues to make news. In the EU country of origin labeling, particularly for meat and dairy products, continues to make progress. An update on the current status can be found here - <http://ictsd.org/i/news/bridgesweekly/72491/> The USDA did finally implement its long stalled country of origin labeling in March 2009 - [www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usdahome?contentidonly=true&contentid=usda\\_cool.xml](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usdahome?contentidonly=true&contentid=usda_cool.xml) even though its own research indicated the cost of the original requirements outweighed benefits [www.ers.usda.gov/features/cool/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/features/cool/)

Cost benefit thinking apparently led the USDA to give up on its animal ID program (another requirement passed in 2003 but long stalled) [www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/02/usda-goes-back-to-the-drawing-board-on-animal-id/](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/02/usda-goes-back-to-the-drawing-board-on-animal-id/) Traceability continues to be of interest particularly for food safety concerns. This article provides some updates on a traceability program for fresh produce, a recent source of a number of food safety outbreaks over the past few years in the US [www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/02/produce-industry-discusses-traceability/](http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/02/produce-industry-discusses-traceability/)

Labeling or traceability of another sort is the focus of a couple of new searchable databases. The World Society for the Protection of Animals had launched a restaurant and grocery store database called EatHumane that identifies restaurants in the US that offer products and menu items created by methods that benefit animal welfare, human health, and the environment. The database can be found here [www.wspa-usa.org/pages/2481\\_eat\\_humane.cfm](http://www.wspa-usa.org/pages/2481_eat_humane.cfm) Another database, FoodHub, is intended to connect small and regional producers with buyers for restaurants, corporations, schools, and other municipal facilities. The database has started its coverage with states in the Pacific Northwest but has plans to expand nationwide <http://food-hub.org/>

Other labeling news focuses on nutrition and health. One provision in the recent US health care legislation will require restaurant chains with more than 20 outlets (including vending machines) to provide calorie labeling for the foods they offer on their menus.

[www.cspinet.org/new/201003211.html](http://www.cspinet.org/new/201003211.html) Not directly connected but certainly part of the general trend towards health and nutrition, Pepsi recently announced it would reduce the salt and added sugar in some of its biggest brands by 25% by 2020 and the amount of saturated fat by 15%. See here [www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/03/pepsico-to-cut-salt-sugar-in-food/](http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/03/pepsico-to-cut-salt-sugar-in-food/) and here [www.economist.com/business-finance/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=15772138](http://www.economist.com/business-finance/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15772138)

Labels are not always the Holy Grail however. Recently the Marine Stewardship Council's standards for labeling to denote sustainable fishery management came under criticism. The main critique seemed to be a potential watering down of standards as the label was applied to more and more commercial fisheries. See articles here <http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2009/09/14/wasted-fishfood/> This came up again recently at the sustainable seafood summit held in Paris <http://seafoodchoices.org/seafoodsummit.php> Not directly connected but there was much criticism of the recent CITES conference decision in Doha not to classify bluefin tuna as an endangered species due to Japan's successful lobbying effort <http://ictsd.org/i/trade-and-sustainable-development-agenda/72600/>.

Finally, in my current country Switzerland there is ongoing discussion about how to define and label goods for their "Swissness". This was a project that began in 2008 [www.ige.ch/en/legal-info/legal-areas/made-in-switzerland.html](http://www.ige.ch/en/legal-info/legal-areas/made-in-switzerland.html) but is still subject to discussion and criticism today as the proposals get debated in parliament [http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/internal-affairs/Food\\_industry\\_grills\\_Swissness\\_bill.html?cid=8534050](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/internal-affairs/Food_industry_grills_Swissness_bill.html?cid=8534050)

## Resources

For some individual voices (e.g. Jamie Oliver, Mark Bittman, Dan Barbar, etc) on sustainable agriculture related topics see the videos available on the Civil Eats website via TED here <http://civileats.com/2010/03/25/ted-talks-food-broadcasting-voices-and-ideas-to-the-public/>

The dream of a pastoral life unspoiled by fresh air, clean water, and open land is not always the reality according to this ranking of counties in the US which found that suburban and urban areas tend to be healthier [www.countyhealthrankings.org/](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/)

A new website containing peer reviewed science research supporting the safety of genetically modified crops is available here <http://academicsreview.org/>

On the other side of the aisle there is a new online petition for a letter to EU Commission President Barroso in response to the recent approval of some new GM crops [www.avaaz.org/en/eu\\_health\\_and\\_biodiversity/?v](http://www.avaaz.org/en/eu_health_and_biodiversity/?v)

For more on GM crops including links to a number of studies skeptical of their benefits see here <http://civileats.com/2010/03/11/the-happy-story-of-gm-crops/>

World Water Day sponsored by the UN produced a number of information, documents, and other analyses related to water usage. [www.worldwaterday.org/](http://www.worldwaterday.org/)

An effort to document potential GI nominee products in the US <http://aop.uark.edu/>

Finally, a great new site for weekly info and links on agricultural economics and urban ag <http://bigpictureagriculture.blogspot.com/>

## Upcoming Events

[www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm](http://www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm)

<http://www.foodreference.com/html/may-food-wine-festivals.html>