



OREGON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



NEEDS ANALYSIS



FINAL REPORT

Prepared by
**Institute for Natural Resources
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Farmers' market

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Executive Summary

The research reported here was conducted to identify interests and needs among various sectors of the Oregon agricultural community regarding sustainable agriculture. The study also sought to gauge potential for establishing a program in Oregon to serve those needs.

The timeline of key events that led to this research initiative include:

- 2002 — Member-grower representatives of NORPAC Foods, Inc., sought to develop stewardship and sustainability guidelines
- 2004 — Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski directed the Oregon Solutions Network to help establish a single, comprehensive source for a full range of resources related to sustainable agriculture
- 2006 — Twenty-seven organizations signed a Declaration of Cooperation to establish the Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Resource Center (OSARC).
- post 2006 — In discussions regarding the center's location and funding, some criticisms arose that the agricultural community has not been involved more broadly. In response, the Oregon State University Extension Agriculture Program volunteered to conduct a series of focus groups to engage a larger representation of agriculture.

The OSU Institute for Natural Resources facilitated the focus groups. Five groups, comprising a total of 36 individuals, met from July 29 to August 7, 2008, in Central Point/Medford, Eugene, Redmond, Pendleton and Aurora. Locations and participants were chosen to represent a range of Oregon geographic regions, commodities, and sectors of the agricultural economy.

Groups discussed six questions:

- Do you need information on sustainable agriculture practices and certification?
 - What barriers have you encountered with any certification efforts?
 - What tools would be most useful to you in learning about sustainable agricultural practices, markets, incentives, or other aspects; and why?
 - Based on earlier conversations and meetings, a sustainable agriculture resource center was to include a website as a way to provide information. Do you still think this is a good vehicle for information, education, and communication? Why or why not?
 - If the state were to create a sustainable agriculture resource center, where should it be housed?
 - How should it be funded?
-

The following themes emerged from the conversations.

The term “sustainable agriculture” is confusing

Although defining sustainable agriculture expressly was not the groups’ purpose, the issue clearly was on participants’ minds. Conversations revealed a broad range of perspectives regarding the term. Many people advocated for a consistent, authoritative definition and standards that would accomplish two things: assure businesses that time, energy, and money would be spent efficiently and effectively; and help consumers understand their choices. Others rejected those ideas out of concern that any such program would lead to mandatory certification.

It is not clear who should set certification standards

Opinions were mixed about which entities should be involved in providing a standard definition and criteria for sustainable agriculture. No one wanted the federal government involved. Some participants were comfortable having an agency such as the Oregon Department of Agriculture take on the task. Others noted that *any* government agency creating standards would face credibility problems because of perceptions that special interests had too much influence; those people suggested that a neutral entity lead the process.

Sustainable agriculture is a consumer-driven trend

Regardless of participants’ attitudes regarding the term “sustainable agriculture,” they generally acknowledged that the trend is consumer driven. Continuing food-safety issues make it unlikely the trend will reverse or fade out.

Local markets make certification less important

Local connections create a sense of trust between consumers and agricultural businesses, reducing the need for certification. The chain of custody that certification provides becomes unnecessary when the link between the producer and the market is direct.

There is a broad range of needs for information, education, and research

Responses indicate information needs range from the basics about sustainable practices and how to get started to questions about specific problems in maintaining certification. Participants also advocated for education for both agricultural businesses and for consumers. Conversations additionally revealed the need for research covering sustainability topics such as marketing and cost–benefit analysis and research to develop new sustainable practices and products.

A website needs to be interactive

There was significant support for a website, although several participants noted challenges such as a low comfort level with computers and the Internet, lack of time to explore online, and inadequate bandwidth or access. Many participants wanted the website to be a network for exchanging information, asking questions, and telling their stories. Participants also wanted to use the website as a sustainable agriculture eBay or craigslist to trade or purchase services and products. They wanted a third party to build and oversee the network, as most businesses don’t have enough time for that.

A comprehensive program still needs person-to-person contact as well as a website

Participants supporting a website said that a website alone would not be enough; there is still a strong need for person-to-person contact. People want someone they can call directly to discuss various problems. Participants also said there is still a need for demonstrations and hands-on training events.

Physical location should be decentralized

Participants said travel is a barrier and a disadvantage to having a central physical location for a sustainable agriculture program. More participants favored a decentralized comprehensive program and liked the idea of using agents in the various support organizations, such as OSU Extension, Soil and Water Conservation districts,



*Vineyard near
harvest time*

and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Existing local offices would provide a built-in program infrastructure.

There was no clear support on funding

Some participants supported public funding for a program aimed at sustainable agriculture. Others were adamant that no tax dollars should be used to support such a program.

Oregon has an opportunity to be a sustainable agriculture leader

Oregon is seen as having a reputation for producing high-quality, trustworthy agricultural products. Participants believed Oregon

could capitalize on that reputation to become a sustainable agriculture leader which will help support the state's agricultural community and secure good market advantage domestically and internationally.

Lack of certification standards creates risks

Participants were concerned by the growing practice among commodity groups of writing their own standards. Distributors cannot assure their purchasers that the products they carry do, in fact, meet sustainability requirements. An array of lax certification standards could damage Oregon's credibility and market advantage as a sustainable agriculture leader.

1.0 Background

Oregon made a commitment to a sustainable future when the Legislature passed House Bill 3948 in 2001. The bill defines sustainability as “using, developing and protecting resources in a manner that enables people to meet current needs and provides that future generations can also meet future needs, from the joint perspective of environmental, economic and community objectives.”

In addition to government programs and actions regarding sustainability, individuals and groups in Oregon’s agricultural sector have

been developing and implementing sustainable agricultural practices and certification programs in response to growing public interest and consumer demand to know where products come from and how they are produced. The needs analysis in this report has its beginnings, in 2002, in efforts among member-grower representatives of NORPAC Foods, Inc., to develop stewardship and sustainability guidelines.

Rick Jacobson, then CEO and President of NORPAC, led the effort. Later, he asked Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski to expand the project

*After the
hay harvest*



through the Oregon Solutions program, an outgrowth of the Oregon Sustainability Act. The aim was to establish a single, comprehensive resource related to sustainable agriculture in order to help those across the spectrum of agricultural interests respond to changing market demands. In December 2004, Oregon Solutions took on the task of developing the Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Resource Center (OSARC). Thayne Dutson, then dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences and director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Oregon State University (OSU), was appointed project convenor.

A group of private and public organizations responded to the invitation to participate in the project. A series of public meetings in 2005 culminated in a Declaration of Cooperation (DOC) in February 2006. Leaders of the 27 participating organizations signed the DOC, which outlined

the contributions that each organizations would dedicate to establish the center. In addition to NORPAC, the agricultural community was represented by the Agricultural Cooperative Council, Tillamook Creamery, Pendleton Grain Growers, Oregon Cherry Growers, and Wilco Cooperative.

Subsequent conversations focused on the center's location and funding. Some criticized the process for not involving the agricultural community more broadly. In response, the Agriculture Program of OSU Extension Service (OSU Extension) volunteered to conduct a series of focus groups to engage a larger representation of agriculture. The Institute for Natural Resources (INR), at Oregon State University, facilitated five focus groups between July 29 and August 7, 2008, and analyzed the resulting data. That analysis is presented here.

2.0 Research Methodology and Design

The purpose of the study is to assess (1) interests and needs regarding sustainable agriculture among Oregon's agricultural community, and (2) the potential to establish a program to serve those needs. Relevant data include the opinions, experiences, and expressed needs across the range of Oregon's agricultural businesses, from production to processing to distribution.

Focus groups offered a means to rapidly gather data that might yield significant insights. Groups brought together people involved with agriculture who would have the opportunity to hear from one another and shape the direction and content of conversations based on interactions. Data analysis was inductive—discussions determined the relevance of various topics. Transcripts from the focus groups were reviewed for patterns in the conversations as well as for distinctive comments that suggest further review or investigation.

Focus Groups as a Research Tool

Focus groups are a good research tool for collecting information about opinions, beliefs, and attitudes on a particular topic among individuals with common interests or characteristics. Unlike surveys that comprise targeted questions with no or limited opportunity for nuance or creative dialog, focus groups facilitate free-form conversation which can uncover issues around a topic that might otherwise go undetected.

Focus groups include a moderator or facilitator who opens dialog among a small group of people who may or may not be familiar with one another. The facilitator establishes an open conversational atmosphere with minimal ground rules to encourage sharing different opinions and experiences without any requirement to reach a consensus or plan. Typically, several focus groups are conducted using the same set of questions in order to identify information patterns in the discussions.

Question Development

OSU Extension and INR staff met in late April 2008 to draft questions, which then were reviewed by OSARC Administrative Council members. As required by OSU, INR then submitted the draft questions to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at OSU, which approved them before the focus groups began.

Focus group questions:

1. Do you need information on sustainable agriculture practices and certification?

Follow-up probe questions:

A. If so, when you need information and assistance regarding any aspect of sustainable agriculture, where do you go to look for it?

B. What challenges do you run into trying to get the information and assistance you need, and what sorts of information gaps have you encountered?

C. What would best help you overcome the challenges we've talked about?

2. What barriers have you encountered with any certification efforts?

3. What tools would be most useful to you in learning about sustainable agricultural practices, markets, incentives or other aspects, and why?

4. Based on earlier conversations and meetings, a sustainable agriculture resource center was to include a website as a way to provide information access. Do you still think this is a good vehicle for information, education and communication? Why or why not?

Hazelnuts



If response is strongly in favor of website:

A. What are the elements it should contain?

5. If the state were to create a sustainable agriculture resource center, where should it be housed?

6. How should it be funded?

Participant Recruitment

Early in 2008, based on discussions regarding the potential for a one-stop information source, OSU Extension staff planned to hold focus groups followed by a survey and a visioning exercise to establish what Oregon sustainable agriculture might look like in 10 years and to determine agricultural entities' needs in order to reach the vision. In late April, funding was deemed sufficient to conduct the first phase, a series of needs-assessment focus groups. The INR was asked to help develop questions and to facilitate the groups over the summer.

Timing was a significant challenge. Summer is, of course, the busiest season for nearly all producers, and there were well-founded concerns that many interests would not be able to attend the focus groups. There was a strong sense, however, that it was important to assess needs as soon as practicable. The trend toward sustainable agriculture has been accelerating domestically and internationally. If the results of the focus groups confirmed demand in the agricultural community, Oregon would do well to move as quickly as possible to develop programs that establish the state as a leader in sustainably produced products.

The OSARC Administrative Council selected focus group locations at its June 12, 2008 meeting. The locations—Central Point, Eugene, Redmond, Pendleton, and Aurora—were chosen to provide participation opportunities across Oregon regions and agricultural interests, within the budget limit.

Administrative Council members were also asked to identify potential participants. Another list of potential participants, reflecting Oregon's top 50 agricultural products by value, was created from the 2006–2007 Oregon Agricultural and Fisheries Statistics,¹ (Table 12 - Cash receipts: Farm marketings by commodity, Oregon,

¹ http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Oregon/Publications/Annual_Statistical_Bulletin/2007%20Bulletin/stats0607.pdf

2004–2006, page A-20) by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

From this list of Oregon agriculture commodity growers and producers, their associations were identified using the Oregon Department of Agriculture database; their executive directors were contacted to recommend individuals to invite to the focus groups. When growers and producers did not have an association, the producers' marketing commission administrators were invited to represent their producers' views. CEOs of interested corporations and cooperatives also were identified, and the CEO was asked to designate a focus group participant.

Invitations were sent by email, regular mail, and in some instances by phone. Follow-up contacts included emails and phone calls. Ongoing efforts were made to balance interests represented within each focus group and across the five groups as people responded. Invitations went to 87 people. Of the 44 who indicated they would attend, 8 were unable to do so. Attendance by location was:

Central Point (Medford)	8
Eugene	8
Redmond	8
Pendleton	4
Aurora (Portland)	8
TOTAL	36

Focus groups included the following interests. In some instances, producers represented multiple commodity groups based on multicrop production operations.

- Vegetable growers
- Fruit growers
- Grain growers
- Meat producers
- Seafood
- Dairies and cheese producers
- Vineyard growers
- Nut growers
- Grass seed growers
- Vegetable- and flower-seed growers
- Nursery-plant growers

- Restaurants
- Producers' cooperatives and commissions
- Vegetable and fruit processors
- Native American tribes
- Institutional food services
- Wholesalers and distributors
- Retailers
- Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- OSU Extension Service
- Agriculture-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

Conducting the Focus Groups

Each focus group was designed to last 2 hours.

A court reporter at every location created a transcript. The facilitator explained the purpose of the focus groups and provided a few ground rules, mostly to ensure that people did not talk over one another and that the court reporter could accurately capture each speaker's contribution. The facilitator read a statement regarding sustainable agriculture from Katy Coba, director, Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA), and then began the session, reminding participants that discussions were to be among those present rather than with the facilitator. There were few interventions by the facilitator, and those were primarily to ensure continuity so that all the questions were addressed during each session.

Analysis and Reporting

Not every participant responded to every question. Answers therefore are not quantified, such as the number of participants favoring a particular suggestion. A survey is the best instrument to determine the strength of support for these exploratory findings.



Specialty radishes

Research guidelines require, in any report of research findings, confidentiality and anonymity for speakers. Quotations below have been edited

as necessary to preserve confidentiality and anonymity and for clarity and brevity.

3.0 Focus Group Themes

The set of mostly open-ended questions was designed to be a starting point for conversations about sustainable agriculture. As focus group members shared opinions and experiences and asked questions of one another, several themes emerged.

3.1 Defining Sustainable Agriculture

The facilitator made it clear at the beginning of each focus group that the purpose of the session was not to define sustainable agriculture. As a starting point, the facilitator read aloud the following statement from Katy Coba, director of ODA:

The term “sustainable agriculture” is very popular these days. The purpose of today’s focus group is to get a better understanding of how you are currently taking advantage of the interest around sustainable agriculture or if not; your interest in finding out more about opportunities with sustainable agriculture. Is there a role for the university system and state government in helping you maximize your opportunities with sustainable agriculture?

We are interested in how you are focusing on sustainable agriculture—is it in production methods, conservation opportunities, processing methods, market opportunities, etc.? Are you able to find the information you need to answer any questions you may have about your interest areas? Do you need better information or even technical assistance related to sustainable agriculture? If so, what do you think is the best way to receive that information or technical assistance? These are the kinds of questions we would like to explore today.

Dialog on the definition of sustainable agriculture ran the gamut from rejection and skepticism to curiosity and tentative or qualified approval to enthusiastic endorsement. Rejection tended to be based on the belief that businesses that have been around for a while are, by definition, sustainable. For some participants, any expansion of the sustainability concept is at best gratuitous and at worst confusing to agricultural interests and consumers alike, is no more than a faddish marketing scheme, and may threaten business survival. For example:

... when we started you said we weren’t going to debate sustainability, and I support that completely. But I think it just confuses the consumer ... because people really don’t understand. And so at some point ... for an Oregon program we should ... take on that challenge of trying to define it

And:

... there’s going to come a time — and we’re just darn near there — where if you’re not certified you will not be sustainable, because nobody’s going to buy your product, because the American people are confused, at best.

For other participants, endorsement was based on the belief that, while the term is ambiguous, it nevertheless has enough substance to provide some guidance. Furthermore, moving toward sustainable agriculture, regardless of how it’s defined, indeed provides a strong market advantage. There is increasing public demand to know where food comes from and how it is produced, especially after various illness outbreaks over the past few years from bacteria and other unhealthy substances in or on agricultural products. Those

who support the concept also were convinced that adopting sustainable practices—which emphasize social responsibility and environmental components in addition to economic elements—is the right thing to do.

The following spectrum of comments on sustainability reflects the diversity of opinions:

... true sustainability is the ability to be financially sustainable and multi-generational in our ability to continue this agriculture practice.

... the practices are sustainable to us because they're working.

I think of sustainability as being more efficient, and not having as much waste.

When I think of sustainability, I think of nutrient cycling. So if there's something that's a waste product that can be a feed product or even an ag input product, that's a more sustainable system.

I can remember picking things covered with white dust from the time I could first navigate my way to a field of beans, berries, cherries, or whatever it was. And ... that's probably where you got started down the wrong track, health wise. And so sustainability is having people that can continue to be alive and buy the food. ... [S]ustainability to me has an entirely different picture ... the ground has healthy organisms in it, and it actually produces food that gives you some nutrition.

... we're looking at sustainability as just a different model for farming, ... where we can combine those best things from organic and from our conventional [farming].



Specialty lettuces

While there was general agreement that the concept of sustainable agriculture is gaining momentum, people expressed confusion regarding what it means to be sustainable. As an example, someone remarked:

Which is really more sustainable? ... Are we really looking at the big picture? ... [T]he best way to apply the water, perhaps, is through ... a center-pivot situation. But when you look at the total cost, you've got to build that equipment of steel. You have to use power to continue to operate it, whereas if you flood-irrigate it and recharge a lot of the aquifers, you have a better sustainability and less total cost to your whole basin.

A participant at another focus group also talked about the need to differentiate sustainable from organic practices:

... a lot of people think sustainability means organic ... I don't think that's what our industry really wants to drive toward, because that in itself is not sustainable.... So I think it would be helpful if some type of definition could

come out of the educational process or the institutions that says ... sustainability doesn't necessarily mean organic. Because organic in itself, if you're measuring carbon usage, organic is horrific.



Teriyaki sauce, developed and marketed with the help of OSU's Food Innovation Center

Use of petrochemicals ... because we have to work the ground so hard to kill the weeds So from that definitional standpoint, if you're measuring carbon footprint, organic isn't the answer, versus sustainability.

Another participant talked about using Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) analyses to move toward sustainable practices and mentioned its potential benefit as an "insurance shield" for traceability of products. This person also noted:

...[we] as an industry need to be ready for people to be weeded out. Because if you go through [a GAP analysis] and you're crappy on food safety and you're crappy on worker safety, you're crappy on economics, and you're crappy on carbon footprint, you maybe shouldn't be in business.

Despite contrasting opinions and levels of acceptance, there is a demand for guidance and consistency on what constitutes sustainable agriculture. However, some participants were concerned that developing an authoritative definition and guidelines would create a *de facto* mandate. There

is also concern that a uniform standard would automatically become fixed, not allowing for evolving knowledge and needs. Beyond wanting a more consistent definition of sustainable agriculture, people offered different opinions regarding who should have authority to define it and to oversee certification.

3.2 Certification Issues

Conflicting views dominated discussions of the value of certification; other issues included motivation, ease of access, implementation, costs, and oversight.

First, some participants believe that certification provides market advantage as well as clarity:

...that's the benefit of certification because then there is some benchmark ... We found that having that third-party certification has allowed us to stand above the other markets ... where sustainability is still being debated and what it means.

And:

I like [certification] because I think to a certain extent government agencies have lost the high road as far as stewardship... [C]ertification assures people that we're doing the right thing... We're gaining value, I believe, in that whole process...

Despite the potential market advantages some people saw in certification, others were not certain it provided any kind of recoverable premium. Some saw cost, both upfront and ongoing, as a barrier to adopting sustainable practices. In addition, markets differ in the level of demand for certification. Some believe that major retailers may be ahead of consumer knowledge in this case.

The following comment reflected the cynicism regarding sustainability and certification expressed by various focus group members:

... you can be sustainable without being certified, and you can be certified

without being sustainable. It is just one of the methods of selling or doing a product certification, and that really has nothing to do with sustainability, in my opinion.

For those seeking certification, the process may be more than frustrating. In at least one case, a producer wanted to get certification but could not find any programs available for that particular commodity.

Certification can also be superfluous in some cases. For example, there seemed to be general agreement that consumers have trust and confidence in local farmers' markets and in local direct sales (a topic discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report); certification would be less relevant in those marketplaces.

Several participants expressed concern about recovering the costs of implementing sustainable practices. One person suggested research is needed on the costs and benefits of implementing sustainable practices and obtaining certification.

Different businesses have opted to certify their products and processes in order to compete overseas. There are, nevertheless, problems based on differences between European standards and domestic standards which make marketing difficult. Although the following statement specifically deals with organic standards, it suggests a similar problem could arise with sustainable-practice standards:

... one of the big things that we constantly have to deal with is some of our European suppliers are certified organic in Europe, and chances are they're much more sustainable than some of the suppliers that are certified organic here. But because of the fact that [the European suppliers are] not certified by the USDA, because they don't pay the money to do so, then we can't call that product ... organic.

Seafood appears to be an exception to dueling certifications. Many seafood products are covered by common international standards through the Marine Stewardship Council. This does not mean that certification is a straightforward process across seafood types. Outcomes appear to be tied to data availability. In one instance, certification took 2 years and was fairly simple. For a different seafood type, however, a focus group member said the process so far has taken 5 years at a cost of more than \$100,000 — without achieving certification, due to insufficient data.

Talking about international standards for seafood, one participant indicated the need for sustainability standards with enough flexibility to be workable and appropriate, particularly where regional differences would affect standards.

There are also concerns about whole-system, field-to-consumer certification. These programs could become fairly complex, depending on business type. For instance, someone in the restaurant business asked:

... if restaurants go to ... certification, what will it be? Will it be just the food we serve and the people we support? Or will it be our facility as well? And if so, who's responsible for that? Because so many restaurants lease their own single building or a part of a building. And will there be financial assistance from outside entities to convince that particular landlord to go that direction? And then we have to do it for all the businesses in the building?

There was considerable conversation about standardizing certification for a range of agricultural products and who should be in charge of doing so. No one favored the federal government's certifying agricultural practices; the perception is that federal standards for organic certification were watered down during development through the political bargaining process. The American National Standards Institute published its sustainable agriculture Draft Standard for Trial Use (SCS-001) in 2007. The process is currently



Christmas tree harvest

drawing criticism and protest; however, the process signals a move to establish nationalized standards.

Controversy over USDA organic standards underscores the need for credibility via careful, transparent deliberation by the right entity to define sustainability and standardize certification criteria. Some in the focus groups favored standards developed by state government; others did not. Some advocated for ODA, an entity they saw as responsive to agriculture's needs. Others felt that credibility and objectivity demanded a third-party approach, or that the state should play only a partial role, such as auditing the auditors.

Commissions' developing their own standards was recognized as a problem, too, as self-certification and an associated lack of clear information on standards can muddy the waters for consumers. Oregon agricultural products would risk acquiring a credibility problem, which might reduce any potential market advantage from sustainability labeling.

Thus, there are advantages and disadvantages to having government enter the certification arena. Potential advantages include:

- Consistency
- A certain degree of protection from special interests by agencies such as ODA, which knows and supports agriculture's needs
- The opportunity for members of the agricultural community to participate in establishing standards

Other focus group members brought up disadvantages:

- Government should not be involved, as it would legitimate and therefore accelerate a confusing and uncalled-for trend toward sustainable agriculture

- It is inappropriate for taxpayer dollars to support such a trend
- A government program is likely to be suspect to both agricultural interests and the public because of typical influence on policy by special interests

There were also concerns that adopting a standard set of criteria and institutionalizing sustainable practices could stop innovation and the drive for continual improvement. One participant voiced unease about standardization, adding that any uniform definition might become a *de facto* mandate:

... in a system like ours, once it shows up somewhere with some type of a government label on it, then it becomes a baseline. And in effect, it becomes a *de facto* agricultural practice [T]hat is a fear, or a concern: that once it becomes in a box, then ... there's no incentive to improve that box.... So I think that reduces some of the kind of ingenuity and entrepreneurship that agriculture is famous for in the state of Oregon.

It appears to participants that a lack of standardization continues to confuse both the agricultural community and consumers, for the reasons discussed above.

3.3 Consumer Demand as a Driver

Regardless of how focus group members viewed sustainable agriculture, most acknowledged that the trend is consumer driven. For example:

... one of the things that I see that's different from a lot of new trends is this seems to be driven by consumers a lot.... I'd like to hear from [retailers] but, maybe ... we as producers and farmers need ... more information [about] what consumers want, and ... what they understand about it, and what they're going to buy in the future.

A commodity-group representative and a distributor were blunt about consumer demand as an

incentive to adopt sustainable practices, and the commodity rep talked about creating demand for certified products:

... there's a big push to get producers [certified], but there has to be a corresponding push to get consumers in the marketplace to identify with those certification standards and labels and demand them ... and pay a premium for that.... We think there's real value in helping to create some consumer marketplace demand for products that have gone through that process.

Further, retailers catering to citizens looking for value have decided to join the trend. In particular:

Wal-Mart ... said last year that whether there's an extra nickel in certification [or not], that it's going to be the price of doing business from here on out. And that's their perspective on it ... we feel that in our industry, sustainability is here to stay. Certification is here to stay.

Someone else commented on prospects for new efficiencies as a result of the trend, just as irrigation improvements occur during a drought.

Most focus group members with an opinion on the subject believe the real impetus for sustainable practices and certification is consumer demand rather than other factors such as added efficiency. Disagreements were mostly about how much that demand truly influences markets and what percentage of the total market it represents.

3.4 The Local Connection

People talked about how local connections create a sense of trust between consumers and agricultural businesses, thus reducing the need for certification. The chain of custody that certification provides becomes unnecessary when the link between the producer and the market is direct. Perhaps consumers' sense of safety comes from the perception that producers are community members and that products are coming from one's "back yard" and providing a personal connection to one's food source. One person talked about the renewed interest in local products as



Hops harvest



both an opportunity and an aspect of agriculture that could benefit from additional support:

I think there's a huge transition going on. People want to know ... are my eggs local, or my frozen foods? And, whereas ... in the last 20 or 30 years, a lot of products were produced in the cheapest place in the United States ... [w]ith the high cost of energy, and this carbon footprint that people are really interested in, that's changing. That's going by the wayside. So, [in] local markets or local production, I think we're seeing a resurgence and [we] have tremendous opportunities. But we need to have research help us.

Many definitions of sustainability include economy, environment, and community. As one person commented, making the effort to purchase locally advances two important elements under that definition. Furthermore, the concept is spreading: just as organic was only a tiny part of the market 10 years ago, so "local" is a rapidly increasing component.

People involved in farmer's markets and other direct-to-consumer sales expressed the desire for some sort of network to provide connections among local businesses and expand efficiencies. One person provided an example:

...we have to be able to exchange information and figure out how we can all complement each other.... [For example] sure, we'll take a certain amount of those waste materials for compost and put them on our fields. And maybe we'll take the broccoli this year and provide the compost to somebody else ... so they're not feeding back the same stuff to their fields [T]hose kinds of local coordinations are going to be the ones that are efficient enough to help us get past these challenges. But that's all this information exchange.... [P]art of it is ... what can we do? How are we doing it? What are we exploring? What worked? What didn't work? ... [I]t would be great to be able to upload that stuff [to the Internet].

Several people in the various focus groups talked about wanting some way to connect with others to help recycle end products, thereby reducing waste and increasing business efficiency. They viewed such efforts as a win–win aspect of sustainability. People also talked about needing more help coordinating those efforts, as time is at a premium for them most of the year. Such a network need not be confined to local markets. The topic is discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.5 Information and Support Needs

Focus group key objectives included determining whether agricultural interests need information on sustainable agricultural practices and, if so, what kinds of information. Discussions touched on issues such as certification of products, facilities, and processes; retaining young people in rural communities; communicating producers' salmon recovery efforts; and which stores emphasize sustainably produced commodities.

For others, finding information on sustainable practices was not generally a problem, especially with Internet access; however, they cited problems getting help to implement methods and programs, maintain certification, and find information on very specific issues. Two participants told of having to go out of state to find answers to very specific questions, one about conventional practices and the other for information to ensure the business could maintain organic certification. In another instance, an individual needed information on meat processors for small poultry operations that might want to supply local farmer's markets. At the same focus group, someone else needed information on selling live poultry that buyers could process on-site themselves so as not to violate processing regulations.

Discussions indicated education and outreach to various agricultural sectors, such as well-designed field trips by OSU, would also be helpful.

When OSARC originally discussed a one-stop information center, it was assumed that information delivery would include a website. Participants thought this would be an appropriate tool;

however, they also wanted additional ways to access information. Several said they were too busy to spend a lot of time on the Internet; they wanted to be able to call someone and ask specific questions. Others find computers and the Internet frustrating and don't use them regularly. Still others currently lack good bandwidth, which makes downloading tedious. The best approach may be, as several participants suggested, a website combined with personnel who could answer specific questions or find answers efficiently.

People across agricultural sectors would like a way to tell their stories (which could be read as "case studies") as part of outreach and education. Other outreach tools, such as a website to post questions and provide information, also would be welcome.

People also wanted opportunities to increase efficiencies through an eBay or craigslist type of service: a site to help locate, buy, and trade services and products, especially products that might be more expensive to obtain elsewhere, or difficult to dispose of, or that would go to waste otherwise. Exchanges to reduce costs and increase efficiencies is fundamental to achieving sustainability, focus group members believe. One gave an example:

One of the greatest contributors to nonsustainability [is] the world of disposables, plastic, and paper; [for example,] one-time use, [then] shipped a hundred miles to a landfill. So now we have polylactic-acid plastic cups and cutlery, and we have paper that's not made from a nonrenewable resource but [from] bamboo and sugar cane... But most of our customers don't have a way to get it to that compost facility. So even though they do the right thing in sourcing the product and buying the product, they don't get it composted and have it return to us as topsoil. It still gets hauled to a landfill. And that's the practicality issue. What's the next step, and who can develop a way for us to get those items composted and a network to get them there that's economically feasible?

While many participants liked the idea of having a website with space for virtual networking, people also talked about the advantages of having person-to-person exchanges. Several people discussed the helpfulness of Extension's sustainable-agriculture workshops, which benefit people who are either too busy to use the Internet extensively or are not proficient with the technology. Workshops also help build networks of support and knowledge among those who attend.

In three of the focus groups, interactions among participants included new information exchange and networking. These underscore the potential usefulness of both a virtual network and of having someone with sustainable agriculture expertise and information connections who can function as a sort of circuit rider, moving through various areas to help different interests within the agricultural community with diverse sustainable agriculture issues.

Legitimacy of information on the Internet was a concern. Many people expressed confidence in Extension and ODA as providers of reliable information. They felt that either or both would be appropriate entities to administer a program providing information and assistance. Participants also advocated strongly for more research on techniques and products, market opportunities, and new possibilities in sustainable practices.

There were also critics. One expressed frustration with Oregon's state-agriculture-related entities for their perceived avoidance of new ways to approach traditional agricultural challenges. Another cited the difficulties of conducting Extension work effectively after funding cuts.

Several people advocated for more outreach, asking for school programs and public education to foster better understanding, among both consumers and producers, of agricultural sustainability and the agricultural community generally.

The effect of climate change on agriculture was not a question for focus groups; however, the topic of carbon footprints came up during discussions. The USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and its Greenhouse Gas Reduction

through Agricultural Carbon Enhancement Network (GRACENET) was cited as useful to this subject.

Additional research will be needed to determine the full range of information and education needs and delivery mechanisms.

3.6 Program Administration, Center Location, and Funding

Opinions varied greatly on who should be in charge of an overall program. Several suggested OSU and Extension would be good candidates because of their neutrality and trustworthiness. Others felt differently. A focus group participant supporting government involvement said:

I like something like the Agriculture Research Service or Oregon State because it's kind of a third party. Because at the end of the day ... the Department of Agriculture works for the governor, and more or less the Department of Ag is the current government's policy.... [A]n Extension Service or university system or the ARS is a great kind of third party ... to administer that process ... [and] isn't unduly influenced ... by the partisanship of the legislature or the governor

Objections to government involvement, however, were based both on concerns about creating new baselines and on requiring certification. For example:

I think if OSU were to take the step of using ... tax dollars to promote sustainability, there would be some folks down here pounding on the door wondering why they're doing that, because they don't have any intention whatsoever of seeking certification. And they're not going to like you stirring up a hornet's nest for something they're not going to do.

Some focus group members who supported the idea of a statewide program used the examples of their respective commissions, which charge fees

for research and promotion activities, as a funding source for research and program administration. It was not clear, however, whether those people were advocating that a state-run program or some other entity implement fee-based services.

People had varied opinions about a physical location. Some who live outside the Willamette Valley talked about travel as an information and education barrier. Others suggested that a dispersed program—run through Extension, or Soil and Water Conservation districts, or other agricultural support entities—would be more helpful. One person observed that the delivery structure for agricultural information, research, and support is already in place through those entities.

Gauging by overall responses, people generally like the idea of comprehensive information and support delivery through the Internet; however, they also want any program to include physical access close to their businesses. Coordinating a dispersed program will require an umbrella entity to provide consistency. Participants did not provide any clear guidance on whether that entity should be in the public or private sector or how it should be funded to carry out its objectives.

3.7 Oregon as a Sustainable Agriculture Leader

Several participants felt being in Oregon is already a market advantage. They believe consumers view Oregon's products as coming from an unspoiled, trustworthy source:

I think Oregon has a fantastic name, because I think we do things different here.... I read an ad a while back... and the tag line I put on it was, in Oregon we don't *say* 'sustainable,' we *define* it.... [O]ur goal is, basically, ... when people think it's from Oregon, [they think] that it's sustainable.

Another participant interested in having an Oregon-certified label for the state's agricultural products suggested the state could do more to capitalize on its reputation:

[We should get] that word out to the public, to ... create that market demand where they may select Oregon over somebody else.... We want people ... [who] think about good, sustainable products ... [to] think of Oregon.



*Taste testing
Oregon beef*

Other focus group members who were less enthusiastic about the sustainable-agriculture trend in general nevertheless supported the idea that Oregon should make an effort to establish itself as a leader. People observed that the Oregon agricultural community already has some advantages, because a fairly extensive community of businesses has already “run with the ball” regarding sustainable practices and certification.

4.0 Conclusions

Many focus-group participants voiced the need for some standardization of the term and criteria to support it, while others argued against it. But there was broad agreement that the current absence of a consistent definition and standards confuses both agricultural businesses and consumers. Participant comments suggest a program that broadly addresses sustaining agriculture and that incorporates the economy, environment, and community might take some of the tension out of program development. Having a consistent definition, as well as flexible standards that accommodate different agricultural practices and regions, would help people move toward sustainable practices with more confidence that time, energy, and money will be spent efficiently and effectively. It also would help consumers understand their choices. Definitions and standards should include requirements for regular review and appropriate updates.

Participants disagreed on which entity should develop definitions and certification standards. No one wanted the federal government to be in charge. The perception seemed to be that affected businesses would have more influence

if the process were kept at the state level. Still, some participants were concerned about any government involvement in a program, because of the perceived potential to create de facto requirements.

If the Oregon Department of Agriculture took the lead in defining “sustainable agriculture” and in setting standards, some participants thought more businesses would be encouraged to get involved. Some agricultural interests are comfortable with ODA and see it as their advocate. However, a potential downside to ODA’s being the lead could be a public perception that special interests had influenced definitions and standards. Some participants suggested that an arm’s-length, neutral entity, such as existing third-party certifiers, lead development of a uniform definition and standards. OSU Extension was another possibility mentioned, though with a concern that the public might not perceive Extension as neutral. More exploration is needed to determine the advantages and disadvantages of various possible leaders. One suggestion was that perhaps the state’s role should be to audit the auditors, to ensure conformity and consistency. Any choice

Ryegrass seed



of lead entity will need to reconcile issues of public perception with levels of acceptance across the agricultural community.

Certification does not yet exist for all agricultural sectors. Some businesses indicated they would apply for certification if standards were available and thought several existing programs could be used as templates. Other participants thought existing certification programs might be out in front of consumer demand and that the cost of certification might not, at this time, generate any price premium.

Participants expressed needs for a broad array of information, from basics about sustainable agriculture and certification to research that answers very specific questions or yields new practices and products to improve sustainability. Participants also suggested that any comprehensive program including education should also incorporate consumer education.

Participants generally liked the idea of a website featuring comprehensive information and including collaborative workspace in which they could ask questions, exchange information, and tell their stories (which could function as “case studies”). Such a site also would help agricultural support entities gain an up-to-the-minute understanding of sustainability issues facing various businesses. And, a consumer education website with an interactive question-and-answer feature would help the agricultural community learn where consumer interest and confusion exist and how those elements shift over time.

While participants generally liked the idea of a comprehensive website and a virtual network, they clearly expressed a need for person-to-person contact and hands-on experience and training. This suggests that maintaining or enhancing the role of support agents will help advance Oregon agriculture’s response to growing trends in sustainability.

Original plans for a comprehensive resource center included the possibility of a central physical location. This did not get much traction in focus groups. Participants talked about long travel

distances as a barrier to educational opportunities, making it unlikely they would use a central facility. More favored a geographically distributed program, noting that the information and education infrastructure already exists in most communities through offices of OSU Extension Service, local soil and water conservation districts, and USDA Natural Resource and Conservation Service. Longstanding relationships among those offices and agricultural businesses were seen as potentially important in helping people move toward more sustainable practices.

Participants observed that any decision on location would not solve one problem inherent in a “one-stop shopping” concept: no one entity currently has all the information and resources in the field of sustainable practices. This suggests that a network structure needs to be developed among all support entities that will ensure information sharing and consistency.

Regardless of the path chosen, it will be necessary to do more outreach across the various sectors of the agricultural community in order to assess the full range of needs. Then it will be necessary to identify existing information sources and determine existing information, education, and research gaps.

There was no clear agreement on whether such a program should receive state funding or be fee based. Some individuals and commodity representatives clearly were opposed to any tax-dollar funding; others indicated it would be all right. Whether a program should be publicly funded and what the funding structure might include requires more exploration.

Participants recognized clearly that the trend toward sustainable agriculture and certification is consumer driven and is unlikely to reverse or fade out. Public demand dictates that any certification program maintain a high degree of integrity and credibility. Challenges to credibility might arise if industries develop their own certification standards and/or if standards are inconsistent. Different businesses indicated that inconsistency would also be a problem for them

as they would not be able to assure their purchasers that the products they carry truly meet sustainability standards.

Oregon's reputation for high-quality, dependable agricultural products and the state's potential to capitalize on that reputation were widely held views. Participants thought Oregon agriculture could leverage its reputation to become a recognized leader in sustainable agriculture practices

Wheat harvest



and products, which would give its agricultural community strong market advantage. However, Oregon must guard against allowing lax standards which would damage its reputation and its advantage in both domestic and international markets.

Developing a consistent definition and criteria for sustainable agriculture was one of the most frequent themes throughout the focus groups.

A closely linked theme was who should have authority to set the definition and standards. Focus group comments also indicated that consumer demand will likely intensify over time, creating further pressure among Oregon's agricultural interests to respond to increased expectations from domestic, regional, national, and international markets. The foregoing issues call for additional, in-depth discussions among Oregon's agricultural community due to their implications.

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