A Century and Counting of American Sustainability

‘We do not inherit the land from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children’.

When it comes to food production and supply, sustainability is no mere trend, but rather an established part of doing business. Yet the very term – sustainability – is tangled in numerous definitions, descriptions and concepts leading to confusion and duplication.

While most would agree with the above quote, the practical demonstration of what is deemed to be sustainable in agriculture or food production also faces a confusion of messages. In recent years, a myriad of sustainability certification schemes and labels have come into existence, with more than 500 different labels in use globally.

One approach to sustainability, much favoured in the United States, is through demonstrating ongoing improvement with voluntary schemes that are independently verified or benchmarked. The vast majority of crop farmers join U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs which, although voluntary and supported by financial incentives, are strictly scrutinized by the USDA. This ensures conservation compliance, supported by the legal framework to apply stiff penalties for abuse or failure to meet program requirements.

A different approach is preferred in Europe by which certified sustainability schemes and labels (generally based on social and environmental issues) are often used by companies aiming to reassure consumers. Such schemes can show that producers have met a definitive set of criteria, but can suffer from a one size fits all and have requirements that are not relevant in different geographies. They also can carry the burden of leaving producers and suppliers with extra work involved in meeting various disparate certification standards for several different customers.

Growing sustainability: Soybean and maize farmers who grow herbicide tolerant (GM) crops can forego ploughing needed to bury stubble from the previous harvest. Instead, the stubble is left on the ground helping to prevent soil erosion and preserving moisture by shading the soil. It eventually breaks down into organic matter creating “new soil”.

Whatever the process, it is for the food industry to understand and accept that there are different paths or pursuits to demonstrate sustainability. No single approach is either right or wrong. The challenge is to appreciate the differences between regions and countries – geophysical, climate, culture – and find ways to reach the overall goal of sustainable food supplies.

In the United States, sustainability is not a 21st Century idea. Since the early 1900s, the U.S. has been enacting legislation to cover conservation and sustainability. But it took the Dust Bowl in the 1930s to crystallise why it was needed. A prolonged drought, strong winds and poor crop and soil management led to massive soil erosion on farms in the Great Plains. 300 metre-high clouds of soil blew across the country resulting in ruined farms, livelihoods and more than 2 million people left homeless.

The Dust Bowl wake-up call brought in its wake the 1935 establishment of the Soil Conservation Service by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By 1938, this initiative had helped to reduce ‘blowing soil’ in the Plains states by 65 percent. The profound impact of the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history also led to American farming looking to the adoption of agri-science and the promotion of scientific practices. Today, many of the initiatives introduced in the 1930s for conservation and land management are still in place and have evolved to meet current environmental demands.

A common view is that U.S. agriculture is large-scale and industrial, with scant regard for the environment. The reality is quite the opposite. Much of America is rural. The big cities may get the attention, but more than 20 percent of the population live in rural areas or small towns and villages. And more than two million Americans work on farms not only making farming more efficient and productive, but also helping to sustain local communities.

The vast majority of American farms and fisheries are owned and run by families. These men and women are on the front line when it comes to protecting and improving the very environment in which they live, work and raise their families. They also value their role in helping to maintain local rural societies. Not for nothing is a saying in the United States that if anyone wants to understand sustainability, then talk to a farmer.

For fishermen, U.S. law mandates that seafood must be caught according to fishery management plans that consider social and economic outcomes for fishing communities. Alaska seafood is further protected by the state’s constitution which mandates sustainability.

To promote a better understanding of the U.S. approach to sustainability and to engage directly with the food production and supply chains, a group of American farmers, fishermen and producers joined together to form the U.S. Sustainability Alliance. Their purpose is to share their values regarding sustainability and conservation and to explore ways to work together with their customers and stakeholders on common challenges.

Management practices of U.S. fisheries have lead to consistently healthy and sustainable harvests.

Today, the Alliance represents more than twenty organizations across the country from soy and grain farmers to poultry and rice producers, from organic farmers to fishermen who brave the seas to harvest seafood, and from almond and peanut growers to dairy farmers and hardwood foresters. Each group has a strong commitment to sustainability with specific policies and detailed programs for their sector. There is a readiness to share their experiences and the challenges they face, not only with other members of the Alliance but also with their customers in overseas markets, such as the UK and the rest of the European Union.

The Alliance has four basic principles. These are built on a strong regulatory framework of federal and state laws; plus voluntary systems in which farmers and producers commit to sustainability practices that strive to:

- Maintain a consistent, predictable and trusted supply.
- Harvest and produce safe food and agricultural products.
- Provide a diverse agricultural profile.
- Achieve continuous economic, environmental and social improvement.

The above building blocks offer a common thread as all of us grapple with the need to feed an ever increasing world population from shrinking farmable land resources. Members of the Alliance know they must never stop innovating because each day brings fresh opportunities to raise standards, whether it is through improved water use and conservation systems or using new crop genetics and technologies.

In developed markets such as the U.S. and Europe, NGOs often blame agribusiness as having a negative impact on the environment. Technologies such as agricultural biotechnology are frequently portrayed as harmful and unsustainable. However, farmers will only choose to use such tools that are shown to cause no harm to their farms, families and consumers. Adoption of tools such as ag biotech succeed only when they work as intended and are safe. Food producers are first and foremost intent on sustaining and enhancing their resources - the soil and oceans - which enable them to deliver safe and secure products.

For members of the U. S. Sustainability Alliance, being sustainable means being committed and in it for the long term. It is a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement of safe, secure, resilient and practical solutions. Alliance members are determined that their personal investment in the stewardship of their farms, forests, and fisheries will sustain the next generation. And the generations to follow.

For questions or more information please email info@thesustainabilityalliance.us or visit www.thesustainabilityalliance.us