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Sustainability Agriculture, Social Responsibility and Dairy Farming

Vera Bitsch

Dept. of Agricultural, Food & Resource Economics

Sustainable agriculture has been discussed a lot during this last decade; so has corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the corporate world. The concepts of sustainability and social responsibility often are used interchangeably, although some authors associate different approaches with each. Also, sustainability is used as a potential justification of the need for CSR (see Porter and Kramer, 2006). Meaning of Sustainable Agriculture

The Committee on Twenty-First Century Systems Agriculture (2010) defines sustainable agriculture as progress with respect to four goals:

1. producing enough to satisfy human needs
2. enhancing environmental quality and protecting the natural resource base
3. being profitable
4. increasing the quality of life for farmers, farm workers, and society as a whole.

Accordingly, sustainability is not an end state, but continuous striving for a wide range of improvements to the current state. While some of these improvements may support each other, others will involve trade-offs. To underline this multi-dimensional view, sustainability is framed along the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance or, in other words, profit, people, and planet.

Similarly, CSR is a concept where businesses take responsibility for their impacts on the environment and the society, in which they are embedded, beyond their economic impacts. A large number of organizations have emerged that purport to measure CSR performance in the corporate world. However, as Porter and Kramer (2006) pointed out, many ratings are neither consistently defined and measured, nor reliable or verifiable. As CSR has reached the agri-food sector, this situation is now impacting the food supply chain from farms through processing to the retail level (Genier, Stamp, and Pfitzer, 2008).

Martin (2002) suggested that firms, or in our case, farms, can engage with sustainability issues on different levels. Acknowledging the civil foundations of the society they are embedded in, most firms will choose to comply with laws and regulations. An additional step in compliance is the acceptance of norms and customs, as expected by the wider society. Innovations and

sustainable development are more likely to occur beyond the compliance levels, at the frontier of production.

Martin distinguishes between the strategic frontier and the structural frontier. At the strategic frontier, sustainability objectives are complementary, meaning an increase in social and environmental sustainability contributes also to economic goals. Once more and more farms operate at the strategic frontier, it is not enough to become more efficient and trade-offs will set in. At the structural frontier, sustainability objectives are competing with each other, meaning an increase in social or environmental sustainability results in reduced economic performance. Therefore, firms and farms will need to make difficult choices, where to position themselves.

Sustainability and Profitability

To economically survive as a private business, farmers have to make sure that their enterprise stays profitable in the long term. Similarly, on a dairy farm, tending to cows and ensuring their health and well-being is part of good agricultural practice for most farmers.

In addition, for many farmers taking care of the land, ensuring environmentally sound practices, and preventing wastefulness in the use of resources, such as fossil fuels, have been part of their farm management ritual since the beginning.

For others, becoming good stewards of the environment and paying attention to the welfare of farm animals has become another requirement in how they go about farming, in recent years. There are the constant demands of animal care, the seasonal peaks of crop planting and harvesting to manage, family to take care of, plus other community responsibilities requiring attention. So how would farmers be able to focus also on the social aspects of sustainable production and responsibility in a broader sense?

While prominent in Europe, the social aspects of sustainability have long taken a back seat in the U.S. debate. However, this is changing. More and more civil movements are including the term “fair” in their description of a sustainable food supply. Large food retailers, such as SYSCO, have introduced codes of ethics for their suppliers; others, such as Wal-Mart, are experimenting with such requirements and developing reporting guidelines.

Sustainability & Farm Management

Social sustainability often is broadly defined to include community impacts, general human rights, social justice, and labor rights and treatment (Bitsch, 2010).

For mid-size and larger dairy operations, the labor management aspects of social sustainability will be a key issue. Beyond the basics of a thorough knowledge of and compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, what will be the benchmarks of sustainable labor management? The answer is, we do not know, yet. But farm owners and their employees need to get involved in that discussion and not leave the decision to advocacy groups, retailers, and consumers alone.

Currently, different measurement, standardization, and certification initiatives for labor and human resource management are underway. An example in the fruit and vegetable supply chain is the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops (SISC), developing sustainability benchmarks with multi-stakeholder involvement (<http://www.stewardshipindex.org/>). This author is currently serving as a coordinator for the SISC human resource metrics workgroup. Although a multiplicity of engaged groups are participating in the workgroup, more employee and more farmer involvement would be beneficial to developing a balanced measurement approach.

National initiatives like the SISC often lack sufficient participation from the Midwest and Northeast. Agriculture is structured and organized differently in these states than in the main specialty crop producing states, California and Florida. This presents different challenges and opportunities.

Sustainability, Responsibility and Labor Issues

Here are some elements that the human resource workgroup has discussed:

- wages and benefits,
- health and safety,
- stable employment and retention,
- compliance with local laws and international conventions, and,
- employee participation in improving workplace conditions.

These elements can be addressed in many different ways and different stakeholder groups interpret them differently. Compared with environmental impacts, which are often quantifiable, labor sustainability and broader social impacts are more difficult to measure. In addition, research on the sustainability impacts of agricultural labor management practices is limited.

Here are some examples of issues deliberated by the workgroup. 1) Should wages and benefits be averaged and reported across all employees or for the lowest paid group? 2) Should a living wage calculation be included as a baseline? 3) Does stable employment mean that the same employees who work on the farm this year have worked for it the previous year or the previous 3 or 5 years? 4) Does employee participation necessarily require union involvement? In addition to these content questions, there are procedural issues to be resolved. When measuring social sustainability, will the farmers report on the metrics based on farm records or will an employee survey or other inputs be needed? Is an external verification of the farm records or farmers' reporting required?

What It Means to Dairy Management

Although the example is from specialty crops production, it matters to dairy farmers. Once a measurement system has been established in one area of agricultural production, processors and retailers will ask their suppliers to adopt it and they will want to apply it broadly. Whether it will be the SISC or a different initiative, the first system to be broadly adopted will set benchmarks for agriculture as a whole. Therefore, where these decisions

come out will matter to the sustainability and long-term survival of any farm in America that hires employees.

Farm employers and employees should start thinking about what they believe socially sustainable production, and in particular sustainable labor management, should look like. The more they discuss it with each other, with processors, buyers, consumers, and other stakeholders in the agri-food system, the more likely they are to have a voice in how it will be defined. In addition, the more farmers and farm employees are involved in these decisions, the better for a sustainable agricultural production.

* An earlier version of this article has been published in the Vegetable Grower News, 2010, October issue.

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