The path to sustainable agriculture
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When it comes to food production, sustainability is no mere trend, but rather an established part of doing business. Jason Clay of WWF has called it a "pre-competitive issue". Yet the very term – sustainability – is tangled in numerous definitions, descriptions and concepts leading to confusion and duplication.

Since the early 1980s, the core tenets of "sustainable agriculture" are portrayed as economic, environmental and social. Most farmers can be forgiven for scratching their heads when asked if they are sustainable. After all, they are unlikely to remain sustainable for very long if they don't look after their land, care for the environment they live in and make a profit

The issue increasingly facing many farmers is how to best demonstrate sustainability in the most efficient and meaningful way. Over the past few years, a myriad of sustainability certification schemes and labels have come into existence to provide evidence of sustainability. Today there are more than 500 different certification schemes in use globally. And, while overall goals might be similar, the standards of many schemes can differ greatly in terms of strictness, legitimacy and if they can be applied globally.

Certified sustainability schemes, widely used in Europe, might be the popular kid on the block. But after 20 years, it's become clear that certification schemes aren't the magic bullet. Most tend to be a one-size-fits-all approach often taking little account of differing production practices, geography and not least the burden and cost to producers of the extra work involved in meeting various disparate certification standards for several different customers.

Speaking at the Oxford Farming Conference in January, Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, outlined his expectations for a UK-based and post-Brexit food labelling system that he insisted would be a "gold standard metric." This 'gold-standard' metric will, said Mr. Gove, "reflect a host of sustainability indicators including soil health, animal welfare and control pollution levels".

That's all well and good, but it does seem as though this could be yet another standard joining the plethora of those already in place. And with Brexit only one planting season away, how will this 'gold standard' apply to imported goods given the different production practices in many countries outside the UK, such as the United States.

Recently there has been much speculation of a post-Brexit UK-U.S. trade deal. Many in the UK regard such a prospect negatively with much uninformed claims that the U.S. has lower standards when it comes to food safety, agricultural and environmental practices and regulatory oversight. The reality is that the U.S. safety and conservation standards are every bit as rigorous as the UK, albeit the types of laws and production practices can be different.

One such difference is with sustainability, where the practice much favoured in the United States, is through demonstrating ongoing improvement by employing voluntary schemes that are independently verified or benchmarked. The great majority of crop farmers join U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs which are voluntary and supported by financial incentives. These programs are strictly scrutinized by the USDA and its some 20,000 field officers who are based across 3,300 counties – in other words in the very locales where the programs are implemented. This ensures conservation compliance, supported by the legal framework to apply stiff penalties for abuse or failure to meet program requirements.

In the United States, sustainability is not a 'new trend'. For more than 100 years, there has been legislation covering conservation and sustainability. However, the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, when a years-long drought, strong winds and poor crop and soil management led to massive soil erosion across farms in the Great Plains. Clouds of soil, sometimes 300 metres high, blew across the country leaving behind ruined farms, destroyed livelihoods and more than 2 million people left homeless.

The profound impact of this worst environmental disaster in U.S. history led to the 1935 establishment of the Soil Conservation Service by the USDA recognizing that bad crop management was a significant factor of the dust bowl. By 1938, this initiative had helped to reduce 'blowing soil' in the Plains states by 65 percent. It also led to American farming introducing a more scientific approach to crop production with 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 environmental demands.

Overall, there are more than 20 federal laws and policies governing land, water and air use by farmers, foresters and fishermen. In addition, numerous state laws also mandate conservation and sustainability requirements. These laws and policies help to frame and support the ongoing improvement approach to sustainability. For example, the U.S. Soybean Export Council, together with members of the United States soy industry developed the Soybean Sustainability Assurance Protocol (SSAP).

This Protocol demonstrates that the majority (over 90 percent) of U.S. soy farmers follow these conservation regulations combined with wide adoption of best management practices in their soy production. The methods for measuring soy's sustainable performance are based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. The SSAP verifies that soy is sustainably produced and covers four key components: sound environmental objectives, social responsibility, conservation focused management practices and continuous improvement.

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 average size of the 2 million farms in the U.S. is 442 acres (178 ha) and 97 percent of these farms are owned and run by families.

In developed markets such as the UK and the U.S., farming is often criticized for having a negative impact on the environment. Pesticides, GMOs, big data and precision farming are frequently portrayed as harmful and unsustainable. However, the adoption of technologies and tools such as the above will only make sense to a farmer if they are safe and if they work as intended. Farmers are first and foremost determined to provide safe food and to sustain their farms, and their land, and their families.

The increasing complexity and global nature of food production and distribution requires more flexibility and collaboration to deliver workable, effective and cost-effective solutions. Whatever the process in meeting societal demands for 'proving' sustainability, there is a collective need 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.

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