

Western Growers discusses sustainability topics

By Greg Johnson
Editor

LA QUINTA, Calif. — “Sustainable” continues to be hard to define for the produce industry, but most seem to agree that “continuous improvement” plays a huge role.

At the 83rd Annual Meeting of Irvine-based Western Growers Nov. 9-12, figuring out how California and Arizona fruit and vegetable producers fit into the sustainability debate was a top priority.

A two-part panel Nov. 11 came to a few conclusions:

- ▶ the road to defining “sustainable” for produce is just beginning;
- ▶ being sustainable must make economic sense for growers in addition to environmental sense;
- ▶ metrics must be specific, measurable and verifiable; and
- ▶ the process is complicated, so continuous improvement must be the goal.

Bob Gray, chief executive officer of Duda Farm Fresh Foods Inc., Oviedo, Fla., and outgoing

chairman of Western Growers, said the U.S. Department of Agriculture actually defined sustainable in the 1990 farm bill. USDA defined sus-

tainable roughly as an integrated system of plant and animal production practices that satisfies people’s food and fiber needs, enhances the environment, makes efficient use of nonrenewable resources, sustains the economic viability of farms and enhances the quality of life for growers and society as a whole.

That’s not too far off, Gray said. Tim York, president of Markon Cooperative Inc., Salinas, said sus-

tainable can and does make economic sense. He said growers need to take credit for what they already do that’s sustainable and look at what makes financial sense in the future.

“But don’t let it be like the food safety issue where buyers define the terms,” he cautioned.

Bill Pool, manager of agriculture production for Wegman’s Inc., Rochester, N.Y., agreed with York that he and his buyer peers shouldn’t define sustainable for growers.

He said like food safety, sustainable agriculture has to be some-

thing that producers build into everyday costs.

“Consumers won’t pay more for sustainable any more than they’ll pay for food safety,” Pool said. “They expect it.”

Common goals

Jonathan Kaplan, director of the Sustainable Agriculture Project in the San Francisco office of the Natural Resources Defense Council, New York, said his group has been working on a sustainability project called the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops.

This effort brings together producers, buyers and nonprofit groups to “develop or adopt specific, measurable and verifiable outcomes-based metrics for documenting and improving sustainable performance in the specialty crop sector.”

Western Growers is an initial participant, as are the United Fresh Produce Association, Washington, D.C., and the Produce Marketing Association, Newark, Del.

Kaplan said there are more common goals between producers and environmental groups than they both acknowledge.

“We’ve got to keep farmers on the land or it becomes car habitat with more congestion and pollution,” he said.

The Keystone Center, Keystone, Colo., has a similar project underway called “Field to Market,” said director Sarah Stokes Alexander.

Field to Market developed metrics for growers to measure environmental outcomes that benefit both the grower and the environment.

“This process is data-driven,” Alexander said. “We care about outcomes, rather than prescribing best practices.”

Jeff Dlott, president and chief executive officer of SureHarvest, a sustainability consulting and information systems company based in Soquel, said the California wine grape growers started a sustainable program about six years ago that could serve as a model for the produce industry.

He said the key to its success is sharing data so growers know where they rate on a sustainability scale.

Western Growers members are looking at sustainable practices in transportation as well. Western Growers signed an agreement with C.H. Robinson Worldwide Inc.,



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Kenneth McCorkle, executive vice president of Wells Fargo, Chicago, speaks with Jeff Dlott, president and chief executive officer of SureHarvest, Soquel, Calif., after a sustainability workshop Nov. 11 during the Western Growers’ annual meeting in La Quinta, Calif.

Eden Prairie, Minn., in January members to reduce their carbon footprint.

Miles-per-load and carbon dioxide emissions are already reduced over 2007 levels, York said.

He said it’s all part of the continuous improvement.

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