

Greener Fields: Signposts for Successful Eco-Labels

Background

For the past two decades, the sustainable agriculture movement has been gaining momentum and greater acceptance. Individual farms across the United States and throughout the world have woven together principles and practices of agricultural sustainability. Research and educational support has gradually improved, transforming individual pockets of knowledge into whole and replicable systems.

Production practices, the environment, and to a lesser extent, quality of life issues have received much-needed attention during this early era of development. Recently, however, there has been growing recognition that the marketplace may be one of the most important factors pushing sustainable agriculture into the mainstream. In fact, farmers, retailers, and consumers increasingly comprehend the connections between healthy food, viable rural communities, environmentally and socially responsible farming methods, and choices at the supermarket.

As a consequence, farmers and retailers alike seek to differentiate their products in the marketplace by communicating positive messages about production practices and social issues to consumers. As consumer interest in sound production practices grows, labeling initiatives, especially “eco-labeling” initiatives, are proliferating at the local, national, and international level.

Eco-labels

American consumers are now accustomed to reading nutrition labels and ingredient lists when shopping for food. Like other food labels, eco-labels help the shopper distinguish products on the supermarket shelf and allow them to make their choices based on product information. But eco-labels differ from nutrition and ingredient lists in that they inform consumers about production practices and social issues in addition to product attributes. And, much like the Good Housekeeping seal, eco-labels act as a seal of approval. Eco-labels clearly identify products that have been produced according to specific guidelines.

Eco-labels typically perform one or all of three key tasks:

Standard setting. To determine eligibility requirements for participation in their program, eco-labeling organizations set standards. Some eco-labeling organizations develop a list of prohibited practices to determine eligibility, while still others use positive point-based systems, assigning various points to specific practices and determining minimum point requirements for participation. Standards commonly involve environmental

There is growing recognition that the marketplace may be one of the most important factors pushing sustainable agriculture into the mainstream.

Collaborating Organizations

The Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA (RAFI-USA) is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Pittsboro, North Carolina. RAFI-USA is dedicated to the preservation of family farms, conservation of agricultural biodiversity, socially responsible use of new technologies, safe food, and a sustainable system of agriculture. Current programs include the promotion of sustainable/organic agriculture, contract agriculture reforms, and analysis and education concerning biodiversity and biotechnology.

The Food Alliance (TFA), a Portland, Oregon nonprofit organization, works to promote the expanded use of sustainable farming systems with the long-term goal of helping farmers become more economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially responsible. Farmers who meet strict environmental and social eligibility requirements earn the right to market their products with the Food Alliance's seal of approval: Food Alliance-Approved. The Food Alliance supports its seal of approval in the marketplace with consumer education campaigns, marketing assistance, and coordination of special programs and events, all targeted toward reconnecting consumers and farmers and returning a greater share of consumer dollars back to the farm.

considerations, such as pesticides use, soil and water conservation practices, and wildlife habitat. More recently, eco-labeling organizations have begun to incorporate standards for socio-economic considerations as well, such as fair trade, locality, and fair treatment of workers.

Verification of compliance. Regardless of the specific standards set, eco-labeling organizations should be able to verify compliance with their standards to ensure that the standards are actually being met. Methods typically used for verification include, but are not limited to, written applications, signed affidavits, lab testing, and on-farm inspections.

Consumer education and marketing. Eco-labeling, in and of itself, is cause-related marketing and an educational tool. Eco-labels provide a vehicle for environmental, technical, or farmer-related information and stories, which inform both consumers and buyers alike. An eco-labeling organization's role in consumer education and marketing can vary widely, from letter-writing campaigns and consumer advocacy to simple product identification.

Eco-labels are entering the marketplace in increasing numbers, both in the United States and throughout the world. While some older labels have been in existence since the 1940s and 50s, a new wave of labels has sprung up in the past decade. By some estimates, there are now over 150 independent eco-labeling programs, including organic, operating in the United States alone.

The organic label is perhaps the most recognized and widespread eco-label in the marketplace today. It communicates valuable information to consumers about the production practices of organic agriculture and differentiates organic products from other natural and conventional products in the marketplace.

In an attempt to build markets for sustainably produced agricultural products, numerous other eco-labeling initiatives have been developed in recent years. Some are relatively small initiatives focused on distinct geographic regions, while others focus exclusively on one specific environmental issue, such as preservation of bird habitat. Some labels don't focus on traditional environmental issues at all; rather they encourage consumers to "buy local" or "pay fair prices." Still other labeling initiatives, such as the certified organic label, are quite ambitious in scope, with national and international accounts and multiple products endorsed.

Although several labeling programs are emerging around the world, the development of marketing incentives for sustainably grown agricultural goods is still in its early infancy. Perhaps as a sign of maturation, the labeling community has recently begun to recognize the need for more formalized networking, collaborative research, and cross-evaluation among efforts to maximize the limited resources in this arena.

The Greener Fields Project

The Greener Fields Project was initiated to intensify the dialogue between labeling initiatives, evaluate programs and policies that support these efforts, and build further capacity and leadership in the sustainable agriculture labeling community. The Greener Fields Project is a collaborative research effort. Participating organizations are the Rural Advancement Foun-

dation International-USA (RAFI-USA), Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet (M&O), the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG), and The Food Alliance (TFA). Our work has been generously supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and other funders.

In an attempt to increase collaboration among sustainable agriculture labeling initiatives, the Greener Fields Project established the following objectives:

- Identify and evaluate the barriers to developing marketing incentives for sustainable agricultural products and the keys to their success.
- Create communication and collaboration between players involved in marketing incentive efforts for sustainable agricultural products.
- Share information on product identity labeling efforts to accelerate the learning curve for all on-going and future sustainable agriculture labeling programs.
- Move the sustainable agriculture marketing community toward more cohesive efforts on product identity labeling.

Methodology

To achieve these objectives, the Greener Fields team performed the following activities and research during the past two years:

Business Advisory Committee

Participation from mainstream stakeholders will ultimately determine the success of eco-labeling initiatives. Therefore, the Greener Fields team enlisted leaders from the business community as partners in our process to help guide our activities in the early stages of the project. Committee members assisted us in the gathering of preliminary research, helped design research questions, and set the agenda for the first focus group session (see below). As the project evolved, the Committee helped assure that all information and research was grounded in the practical realities of the marketplace and/or each member's own particular experience. The Business Advisory Committee included farmers, distributors, retailers, brokers, processors, farm certifiers, and market and policy analysts.

Stakeholder Forums

The Greener Fields Project hosted three forums to gather information on attitudes, barriers, and opportunities; generate communication and collaboration; and share information. Each forum addressed the following questions:

- How can eco-labels address the multiple goals — environmental, social, economic — of sustainable agriculture in the marketplace? Which sustainable agriculture messages seem to resonate most with consumers?
- How can each new eco-label actually grow demand for sustainably produced agricultural products?
- How can eco-labeling programs assure that farmers get a higher return on products, and thus create economic incentives to farm more sustainably?

Collaborating Organizations

The Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG) is made up of organizations and individuals in the Southern United States who are working to remove the technical, institutional, and macro-economic barriers to agricultural sustainability. SSAWG provides education on sustainable farming practices; enhances farmer-controlled marketing strategies for ecological production; advocates for increased farmer representation in agricultural policy, research, and training; develops farmer leadership in the sustainable agriculture movement; and teaches youth about the principles and practices of sustainable agriculture.

Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet is a national nonprofit consumer education and advocacy organization seeking to effect lasting protection of children's environmental health and the environment. Operating on the belief that "environmental change begins at home," Mothers & Others is working to bring about a shift in overall consumption patterns by focusing the collective marketplace power of mothers, among others, on choices that are healthy, safe and environmentally sound for their families and communities. Mothers & Others provides the tools — the information, ideas, and resources — that consumers need to minimize or eliminate personal exposure to environmental toxins and reduce individual and community consumption of natural resources. Equipped with these tools, consumers are making choices that benefit their families as well as the environment.

Business Advisory Committee

Susan Alderson
Organic Essentials

Hilary Baum
Market Place Partners

Chuck Benbrook, Ph.D.
Benbrook Consulting Services

Leonard Bergey
Bergey's Dairy Farm

Dr. Hasan Bolkan
Campbell Research & Development
Campbell Soup Company

Ben Burkett
Mississippi Association of
Cooperatives

Andrea Clarke
USDA - Natural Resources
Conservation Service
Social Sciences Institute

Bill Coli, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts
Cooperative Extension

Michael Dimock
Sunflower Strategies

Chad Dobson
Consumer's Choice Council

Laura Freeman
Laura's Lean Beef

David Granatstein
Washington State University
Tree Fruit Research and Extension

- How can eco-label programs protect local community food security while attempting to harmonize with other labels globally?
- What market structure barriers need to be overcome for eco-labeling programs to become successful?
- What lessons can be learned from organic labeling and other eco-labeling programs, both in the United States and in Europe?

Through these group sessions, we created opportunities to engage stakeholders in the process of defining where the sustainable agriculture labeling community wants to go and how it will get there. We examined areas of self-interest and began to explore possible marketplace engines for stimulating growth in both demand and supply of sustainable agricultural products. As participants began to articulate the guiding principles of today's labeling initiatives, they began to collaborate and communicate among themselves.

Through interactive presentations, round table discussions, break-out sessions, and other means, the groups explored possible communication and information structures, and symbiotic collaborations, and they identified the next step in the process toward widespread, effective eco-labeling programs.

Consumer Research

Understanding consumer attitudes and behavior toward sustainable agricultural products is a key component to any successful labeling initiative. In 1997, Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet (M&O) instituted an annual market survey mechanism in cooperation with the Washington-based market research team, the Hartman Group. An evaluative tool, the Consumer Behavior Index (CBI), measures the attitudes, motivations, and changes in individual behavior of M&O members and the larger population. Each year, the CBI consists of a survey of a sampling of M&O's national membership capturing their demographics, lifestyles, motivations, concerns, and product and brand usage across all sectors of the green marketplace. With this survey tool, Mothers & Others helped the Greener Fields team determine the extent to which consumers can "pull" the market for products of sustainable agriculture.

Working with The Food Alliance, the Hartman Group also conducted research to outline consumer attitudes on various existing eco-labeling, seal, and certification programs. This research examines what consumers want from eco-labeling initiatives and offers insights and recommendations regarding communications strategies to support eco-label and certification initiatives.

The Eco-labeling Landscape

The Greener Fields Project explored the eco-labeling landscape through three separate but mutually supportive research endeavors:

- a review of the development of national and international organic standards
- an extensive written and phone survey of representative U.S. eco-labeling programs
- a field survey of some of the more established European eco-labeling programs.

Our intent was to explore a broad range of programs, from organic to sustainable, and national to international. We explored labels that cover numerous green and social goals — such as environment, biodiversity, conservation, fair trade, labor, and local food security. To maximize the lessons learned, we explored programs from the United States and from Europe, and from within agriculture and from other fields (e.g. wood products, marine products). Through a review of field notes, written and phone surveys, and focus groups questions, we also extracted some of the transferable lessons from the organic labeling process.

Information Dissemination and Communication

Finally, while the Greener Fields Project routinely shared data gathered and insights gained throughout the course of our two-year research project, this report represents the final stage of Phase I of our research. Our hope is that the rich dialogue and exchange of ideas will not stop here.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of our two-year research project, the Greener Fields team endeavored to develop common understandings among the many practitioners of and advocates for sustainable agriculture. Not only do we offer strategies for success in this report; we also uncover and examine common pitfalls and paths best avoided. This is a “snapshot of the state of the art.” We hope that our findings will strengthen and enrich the emerging labeling community’s multi-faceted efforts.

We did not attempt to form a formal network or create a new organization. Rather, the Greener Fields Project helped to lay the foundation for communication and collaboration among market incentive programs and has begun to coalesce the disparate elements of the sustainable agricultural marketing community into a working body. In the process, we discovered tremendous interest in continued collaboration and coordination among labeling initiatives. This report may be just the beginning of our shared potential. 🌱

Business Advisory Committee

Thomas Green
The IPM Institute of North America

Harvey Hartman
The Hartman Group

Nicholas Hether
Gerber Products Company

Richard Kashmanian
U.S.EPA/Office of Policy

Sarah Lynch
World Wildlife Fund

Theresa Marquez
CROPP Cooperative

Mary Moore
D’Agostino Supermarkets

Curt Petzoldt
IPM Program
NY Agriculture Experiment Station, Cornell University

J. B. Pratt
Pratt Foods

Mark Ritchie
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Bill Wolf
Wolf and Associates, Inc.