



## Defining the Meaning of “Sustainability”

*A Roundtable on the Development of the New ANSI Sustainable Agriculture Practice Standard*

What does the word “sustainable” really mean? In today’s market, it’s associated with everything from low-carbon footprints and biofuels to fair trade—and of course, organic. As the levels of consumer consciousness have risen, though, so have the number of green and ethical claims, many of which have no third-party verification or any concrete guidelines to speak of at all.

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In order to better define what it means to be sustainable and establish national verifiable parameters, Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) initiated the process to develop a national standard for sustainable agriculture under the rules of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). SCS has passed the green baton to the Leonardo Academy, a nonprofit organization that specializes in developing standards and metrics for sustainability. As required by the ANSI process, the Leonardo Academy has put together a committee of over 50 stakeholders with a balanced representation of members from four areas including:

- Producers (growers, shippers, packers, farmer organizations)
- Users (retailers and restaurants, food service companies, product handlers, processors, distributors, and manufacturers)
- Environmentalists (individuals and representatives of organizations focused on preserving and improving the environment)
- General Interest (government representatives, labor groups and representatives, academic scientists, consumer groups, other interested parties)

The creation of this standard has been somewhat controversial and has raised many questions within the organic community. To answer these questions, Organic Processing hosted a roundtable discussion with several committee members along with representatives from SCS and the Leonardo Academy.

**OP: Why is there a need for this standard and what is the overall goal?**

**Amanda Raster:** Right now there are a number of sustainable agriculture initiatives out there and growers are often asked to meet the requirements of multiple standards. This national initiative could serve as an umbrella that encompasses the best environmental metrics and measurement tools that exist. Overall, having a sustainability standard with a national scope would be an effective way to drive changes in the marketplace.

**Linda Brown:** Also, with the large number of sustainability initiatives and certifications in the marketplace there is a potential for increasing consumer confusion. The word “sustainability” faces many of the same challenges that “organic” faced in the past. For years preceding the establishment of the National Organic Program (NOP), there were a variety of definitions for the term “organic.” At some point, it became clear that the proliferation of competing definitions was not pushing organic agriculture forward and there was an effort to standardize. The same needs to be done to define sustainable practices, some of which are covered by the organic regulation, but many of which are not currently included in any official national regulation.

**OP: For the volunteer committee members at this roundtable discussion, why did each of you think it was important to be involved in the development of this standard?**

**John Foster:** It’s a real priority for me, as well as for Earthbound, to make sure that whatever comes out of this process is supportive of the hard work and dedication that the organic community and industry has done in the realm of sustainability. In a nutshell, I want to make sure that this complements organic standards instead of competing with them. I think there’s plenty of room for both. What organic has done is key to sustainability, but I also recognize that organic isn’t everything and there is a need for something else that addresses issues the organic regulation doesn’t cover.

**Grace Gershuny:** As a representative of the Organic Trade Association, it’s in the interest of the organic industry to make sure that organic is represented in creating this standard. There also needs to be a very clear distinction between “organic” and “sustainable,” so that the two terms don’t become muddled or interchangeable.

**Jim Pierce:** The interest of the Food Trade Sustainability Leadership Association is to make sure the standards are legitimate. The organic community has dealt with a lot of eco-labels like “grass-fed,” “free range” and “natural,” which are non-regulated and ultimately confusing. These indirectly or directly take away from the legitimacy of organic. We wanted to make sure that the end product of this effort is not just another easy way for conventional companies to greenwash production practices.

**Bama Athreya:** My focus is on workers’ rights. We have for some years now been very friendly with the organic community because of the fact that organic does address health and safety issues that workers face in terms of removing the exposure to pesticides. However, when the organic regulations were created there wasn’t any formal definition of workers’ rights. Even when workers’ rights were grafted on, there was no capacity to implement them. The reality of the organic regulation was that it was more about the production than the people producing. We were attracted to the development of the fair labor practices and community benefits that were included in the ANSI standard. We felt this might be a good place, by no means the only place, to remind people that defining sustainability should also include the ethical treatment of workers in the production process.

**OP: In addition to labor rights, what other elements of sustainability have been discussed within this standard that are not currently addressed by the NOP?**

**Linda Brown:** Another area this standard addresses is energy efficiency and issues related to reducing the climate footprint. “Carbon footprint” is the term we’ve gotten used to over the last year or two, which is part of the story, but it’s not the full story when you look at pollutants that impact the climate. Resources are also a part of this discussion, which could include the types of materials used for packaging. Waste management and disposal requirements comprise a big area we are looking to include as well.

**Bama Athreya:** Another area being discussed is community engagement, in terms of working with local communities to preserve and ensure that historical, cultural and environmental concerns are being met. It’s important to consider the dynamic between the farm and the surrounding environment. While that’s addressed more by organic compared to any other system, it’s not explicitly part of the organic standards.

**Grace Gershuny:** There is also the economic side of sustainability, or fair trade. It’s not just about what farm workers are paid, but also the cost of production and the price that farmers receive. Right now, the scope for this standard is very big. For example, it started out not addressing animal agriculture at all. Some assume it would not be possible, while others say that it’s critical to include animal agriculture because of the need to integrate crops and livestock in a sustainable system.

**Jim Pierce:** It’s true, there’s a lot on the table and the discussion has actually broadened from where it began. It’s a good opportunity, but at the same time, nobody expects it to remain as broad as it is right now.

**Linda Brown:** Currently, all of our task forces are meeting and working on preliminary documents that are going to be brought back to the full standards committee in May. All these issues that were just mentioned are being debated within the relevant task forces and will be presented to the full committee.

**OP: So where does organic fit into all of this so far? I have heard that organic is going to be the “gold standard” for sustainable production.**

**Linda Brown:** The draft standard that SCS brought to the table contains language that explicitly references organic practices in terms of pest management and soil fertility practices, but that’s only one reference document for the committee’s consideration at this point.

**Grace Gershuny:** The whole thing is on the table right now and what we’re doing at this point is looking at reference documents and the needs assessment and trying to come up with a consensus for this particular committee that reflects a broad base of stakeholders. Part of that is to incorporate principles from the work that’s been done in organic. At this

point, however, there's no way to say exactly how that's going to fit together.

**John Foster:** When we use phrases or questions like, "Is organic going to be the gold standard?" it makes it seem like organic is what everyone is going for. I don't think we can use that language for much longer. It makes it difficult to have the conversation. In terms of production practices, organic may very well be the gold standard, but only for a part of what sustainability covers. We also have to ask if organic is a starting point as far as production practices go, or the gold standard. If organic is the starting point, in terms of production practices, that by definition will exclude other kinds of production practices. If we say organic is where we start on how to grow crops, I'm comfortable with that—not everyone on the committee is, though.

**Grace Gershuny:** One of the important points of this is that it provides an entry point that allows those who would not consider becoming organic to be recognized for taking steps toward more sustainable practices. I think the real issues are going to come down to how low will the entry point be.

**Jim Pierce:** It was very heartening to see the draft standards include credit for organic practices. However, right now organic is only about 2 percent of the production in the United States. In order to have a broader base of influence, we'd like to give credit to those practicing more sustainable farming measures that may not be moving toward organic and give credit to farmers that are moving toward organic. Right now there's no economic incentive or reward until you get organic certified. This standard could be the vehicle to reward farmers at whatever point they are within the sustainability spectrum.

**OP: I've heard that representatives from the GMO industry are involved. This seems to go against what most of us believe is sustainable agriculture. Why are they part of this?**

**Amanda Raster:** One of the requirements in developing an ANSI standard is that anyone who may be affected by the standard or the development process must be included in some way. We knew that if we didn't put people on the committee who supported GMOs and biotech that the standards wouldn't move forward. ANSI would not approve a final standard if all of the affected parties weren't at the table in some way or another.

**Grace Gershuny:** Interestingly, many who support GMOs truly believe their use is an important tool for sustainable agriculture. They believe this is a technological solution to problems.

**Jim Pierce:** What I learned at the first meeting is that the farmers using GMOs really do consider themselves American heroes. When we came at them with an anti-GMO policy, they were really offended. GMOs are clearly disallowed in the organic standard, and that's worked to our advantage in marketing organic over and over. A side benefit being raised in this standard is that it may encourage farmers to confront these biotech companies and say "Look, if GMOs are going to be included in sustainable agriculture practice, then you'll have to remove these insidious social and economic provisions and lawsuits over patented technology because that is clearly not sustainable."

**Bama Athreya:** We're trying to remind everyone as well that anything developed for the U.S. market is going to affect producers around the world. We have seen the problems GMOs can create, particularly in the context of poor developing countries. The science of it is beyond my organization, but the impact in terms of farmer debt absolutely has to be taken into account when talking about social sustainability. The most dramatic examples are the farmers in India. We're seeing thousands of suicides because farmers are so deeply indebted to GMO and chemical providers that if something happens to their crop and they cannot pay their debts then they feel they have no other choice.

**Linda Brown:** Just adding on one more thought—this issue is an interesting one because this committee, and many of the task forces, have agreed that economic viability is one of the three pillars of sustainability. However, the discussion of what is included in economic viability is only now beginning. The extent to which these kinds of examples can be raised will be important as this issue is put on the table for discussion.

**OP: Is this going to become yet another label on the side of a package?**

**Grace Gershuny:** It has been discussed how this standard would be used other than to be an end-consumer label. It could be used by companies as in-house sustainability guide. Another option is to use it for public policy to offer a reward to those implementing sustainable practices instead of making it some kind of market-based reward. Nothing has been determined yet but I think it should be made clear we aren't necessarily talking about coming up with another label stuck on a product. There is a lot of concern among some members of this committee that it definitely should not be another end-consumer label.

**Jim Pierce:** Using this as another sustainable agriculture consumer label threatened many on the committee, from NGOs to producers and OTA members. As soon as we got past that into this behind-the-scenes-incentive-programs base, a lot more came together. I wouldn't say by any means we're all in agreement, but that was a breakthrough moment.

**Linda Brown:** The flip side of this argument is that there are already sustainability labels in the marketplace and certifiers who are promoting their labels as the sustainable option to organic in the marketplace—and more are coming. They are happening in sector-specific areas; for example, in the wine industry there are five or six sustainability programs which are now beginning to show up on wine labels. There are examples in the floral sector as well. While I agree strongly with the idea that there's a need for incentives to drive people toward better practices, I actually do think it's very important for a label to be considered so that all of these proprietary initiatives in the marketplace are held against some kind of standard that has gone through a transparent review process. None of the claims in the marketplace today have had a comparable level of diverse stakeholder input.

**OP: What does the timeline look like for the standard? How can processors or the community at large get involved?**

**Amanda Raster:** At this point, we anticipate that this process will be a couple of years of work. There are a lot of issues on the table that need to be addressed, and it's going to take a lot of time and thought to address them properly.

How can organic processors get involved? The task forces are open to anyone who is interested and wants to get engaged, and subcommittees will be formed after the task force work is completed. Anyone can participate on any subcommittees that apply to their particular areas of interest. There'll also be a chance for public comment and review of the final draft standards. Lastly, anyone is welcome to provide comment on the process or any of the working documents at any time throughout the standard development phase. There is a pretty broad range of ways to participate in this process at many levels.

**Linda Brown:** I've participated in standard settings through the International Standards Organization, ISO, which some people jokingly refer to as the international sightseeing organization, which means, the barrier to participation is the fact that you have to travel to meetings all over the world. This tends to preclude people without resources from participating. This process, however, is largely being done via teleconference so people can participate where they are.

**OP: Where can our readers go for more information?**

**Amanda Raster:** They can go to [www.leonardoacademy.org](http://www.leonardoacademy.org). There, we have a page devoted to the development of this standard that includes background information on the process, updates, public documents and a detailed Q&A. Interested parties can also email me at [amanda@leonardoacademy.org](mailto:amanda@leonardoacademy.org).



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**John Foster** is the senior manager of organic integrity at Earthbound Farm, where he ensures the organic integrity of all products supplied to or handled by the company. Prior to joining Earthbound Farm, Foster was a consultant specializing in organic certification programs and has also taught at the college level on organic horticulture and crop production.

**Jim Pierce** is the global certification program manager for the organic certification agency, Oregon Tilth and chair of the Needs Assessment Task Force for the ANSI Sustainable Agriculture Practice Standard. At Tilth, Pierce monitors, assesses and interprets international organic standards for several organic producers and processors. Previous to this position Jim worked for Organic Valley/CROPP Cooperative as certification czar.



**Grace Gershuny** is a representative for the Organic Trade Association, and the vice secretary and co-chair of the Mission and Principles Task Force for the ANSI Sustainable Agriculture Practice Standard. She was a key leader in developing the organic rule and has served on the staff of the NOP and authored numerous books. She currently consults on regulatory and





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