

Sustainability programs that cover multiple crops can create efficiencies and help build partnerships throughout the food chain.

While tackling such common areas as energy use, pest management, and water and soil quality, these broad-focused programs address crop-specific needs through offshoots or partnerships with commodity groups.

"If everyone works together, then we can save money and effort," says Lori Berger, executive director of the Tulare, Calif.-based California Specialty Crops Council. The alternative is each program covering the same ground to devise similar, if not identical, results.

The council aims to develop definitions and templates that a wide range of commodity groups easily can customize and adopt. Grouping by crop types may simplify the wide diversity of needs: row crops and tree fruit, for instance, or vegetables, berries and nuts.

"Then you can get into very specific, dialed-in, prescribed activities for each commodity," Berger says.

Ideally, everyone in the specialty crop sector, from growers to retailers, would adopt a single approach to measuring sustainability, says Jessica Siegal, program director for the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops, a new project building concrete performance measures for sustainability.

"The specialty crops sector really wants a unified set of metrics for decision-making," Siegal says. That result also would help stave off proliferating audits and reporting requirements.

The Stewardship Index brings together growers and industry associations; retailers, processors and other customer groups; and environmental and public-interest organizations. Building consensus is a challenge, but ultimately should achieve more than unilateral efforts, she says.

Last year the group worked with 35 farms and food operations to assess eight core metrics: air and soil quality, soil nutrients, biodiversity, waste management, and use of pesticides, energy and water. With that data, they aim to release four or five revised metrics for a broader pilot later this year.

They'll be "the lower-hanging fruit," areas that are most meaningful and readily accessible to growers, Siegal says.

"There's a strong demand for simpler and sooner," she says.

"But we're trying to bite it off in realistic chunks."

Expanding beyond potatoes

Another effort is evolving out of Wisconsin's successful Healthy Grown Potatoes program to take on a broader, whole-farm perspective. Healthy Grown's ecosystem and integrated pest management emphasis are major components of a sustainability program, says program coordinator Deana Knuteson, a bio-IPM researcher at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Growers and others in the industry pushed for the expansion.

"Each farm is managed for the rotation of crops," says Andy Wallendal, owner and manager of Wallendal Supply Inc. in Grand Marsh, Wis. Putting the whole operation—rather than the potato portion alone—under the program creates synergies where each crop in the rotation helps the others.

A crop-specific program considers only that acreage and the resources needed for production, Wallendal says. A whole-farm program encompasses all the tilled acres as well as all other land on the farm, including woodlands, wetlands and other acres dedicated to conservation measures.

"This asks more complex questions," he says. "It's the natural next step."

Crop-specific areas include best-management practices, slow-release fertilizers, cover crops and intercropping, Knuteson says. Whole-farm topics include conservation measures along with renewable energy, production facilities and scouting. Social aspects are addressed as well, from employee and community concerns to such areas as farm succession plans.

Healthy Grown's pilot didn't set minimum or maximum scores, but participants all saw room for improvement, she says.

Expansion is progressing in small steps, with this past winter's pilot in potatoes, carrots and snap beans and moving next into sweet corn and peas. Eventually Knuteson hopes to grow beyond Wisconsin to include other Midwest growers and perhaps from there to other parts of the country.

Pioneer program serves as model

One pioneering program, the San Fran-

cisco-based California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, has served as a model for other commodity groups, says Allison Jordan, executive director.

Launched in 2002, the group is a partnership between the Wine Institute and California Association of Winegrape Growers.

An online educational workbook and self-assessment tool takes growers and winery operators through a continuum of 227 practices, scoring each on a scale from minimally to most sustainable.

"The idea is to keep moving up" the scale—a scale that's periodically revised to recognize that sustainability is an ongoing effort, Jordan says.

Participants represent 70 percent of the state's winegrape acreage and 65 percent of its wine production, she says. They can use their assessment scores not only to chart their progress from year to year, but also to compare with industry averages.

That aggregate data provides a useful tool for the industry to share its sustainability efforts with consumers and other customers.

Some benefits are more tangible than others. Investments in training and people, for example, help build employee morale, Jordan says. Energy-efficient upgrades to facilities and equipment reduce operating costs, especially where rebates or tax credits are options.

And, she says, "If you're paying attention to all these processes and practices, you're probably improving fruit quality."

A mix of green and black

Sustainability programs first must "overcome the perception that it takes a lot of time and money to be sustainable," she says. Participants find either new practices that make business sense or existing practices that they simply need to document.

That documentation may give growers pause, but without it they can't tell customers their story, Berger says.

Wallendal sees benefits in improving land stewardship and answering consumer demands for "a more environmentally and socially responsible product."

But economic sustainability is equally vital. "If you're not in the black, you can't be green," he says.

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