

OPINION



The meaning of sustainability depends on your point of view

When you talk about sustainable agriculture, you need to look not just at the farm but what is happening all around it

BY BRENDA SCHOEPP
AF COLUMNIST

Redefining sustainability

Battered about like a mariner's ship at sea, the "sustainable" world is getting frayed at the edges.

It leaks the slow leak, one that was built in agriculture on the idealism of creating a pathway to consumers but rested on that assurance without producer reward. Certainly, the journey is worth examining as we navigate just what a sustainable world looks like. Are we holistic enough in our view? Is the lens turned inward or is it scanning the horizon, taking in all the elements?

I am looking at a picture I took of farmers in the Andes between Cusco and Ollantaytambo. The earth is red and, even at 3,400 metres, grows great potatoes. (And when mixed with water, makes for solid building blocks.) I should not be taking this picture. The cultural fears of freezing the spirit of those in the photograph are present but the humble farmers walking behind their oxen stir me and I press the button.

In itself, the environment is surreal and idealistic. It looks sustainable. There is no threat of erosion or compaction. The farmers understand the direction of the wind and the times of the rain. Chemicals are not used. Manure from the oxen is returned to the soil. It has been tilled this way for more than a thousand years and will be for a thousand more.

What's wrong with this picture?

There are several lines of thinking in the interpretation of this scene. The First World young socialist who is idealistic will think farms like these will feed the world without understanding

there is a broken global market infrastructure. It could be the humanitarian who thinks the farmer is "poor" and sends a tractor, even though there is no fuel or parts to run that tractor. The government that, without ever asking, exploits farmers' illiteracy, imposes high taxes without improving infrastructure and allows access to other industry. And finally, the farmer on display as seen in the eyes of a tourist who will go home with a photo of a quaint scene, but never know the story.

It is a snapshot in time but when we shift to a wider lens we may see the actual life of that farm family.

Kind and generous, they are flawlessly clean even though the structure they live in has a dirt floor. There is a television but no books. The chickens and children are free to scamper about as chickens and children should do. A toothless grin and welcoming gestures bring you in. Warm beer or maybe Inca Cola (if the family can afford it) and soup made from last week's fowl. Pride.

It would be nice if the truck would come on time to take the harvest to market, but then again, who knows. You might get sick from the soup, the water is no good since the mines opened. Our son was lost in a fight, our mother raped when she opposed trucks driving through her hut. Our daughters cannot go outside or follow us to the field. Pappie's cough won't stop now for the dust. Manyana (tomorrow) maybe life will be better.

The layers of civilization are intriguing, but how government and business shifts attention from its crimes to focus on something else is profound — for over these Peruvian mountains a different kind of reality is taking place.

The sustainable farmer who everyone loves is threatened, not by his or her own actions, but the actions of others.

The activity of Canadian gold, copper, and silver mining companies contaminates water, threatens livelihood, clashes with cultures, and exploits women. There is no structure to put money back into the country in which you extract but continued access is important and comes with a price tag of humanitarian aid, a pittance for social licence. No one is really responsible and the defeat of Bill C-300, the Responsible Mining Act in Canada, basically allows for companies to continue to buy their way in without any human rights, cultural, social, spiritual or environmental accountability.

So when

we talk about sustainability, let's not get locked into one frame. Not only do farmers who are fighting contamination have to eat those foods themselves (think arsenic residue in water after gold extraction) but they are exporting that food to our counters. And at home, the idealistic small family farm that sells everything local is as much at risk to exploitation and contamination from resource development as the large commodity farmer. Our rights as landowners are challenged further by the "sustainable" movement that holds us responsible while those who can destroy our livelihood are not because they don't have to be.

Regulation that comes under the umbrella of environmental sustainability is affecting agricultural enterprises. The recent move by the state of California to target dairy farms because they are seen as the major contributors of methane is a case in point. Soil and water are the beginning of all life and it is around this that all civilization pros-

pers. And we as farmers continue to be led down corporate sustainable initiatives for our benefit, we might pause to examine what is happening on the other side of the mountain.

All industry, and that includes agriculture, should be accountable. But what happens when those who play on our turf are not? The pipeline that broke and leaves a city without water, the gas leak that killed every insect, the aquifers that are contaminated, the stream that dries up, the cows that no longer milk, or the unexplainable wilting of vegetables.

Are the exposures we live with a choice or are they disguised as flagships of "more production" and "more jobs" and sold because of a much larger agenda of access without liability? Should it not be we who define our own sustainable systems that take into account longevity, culture, history, social justice, human and soil and water health, and land access?

When we talk of ecological and ethical responsibility in agriculture everyone cheers. But to protect our planet, our food, our communities, and ourselves we have to demand the same standards from other industries including agri-food.

Agriculture can work on its own social licence and will prosper in doing so. But we must press that our partners up and down the line who employ tens of thousands of workers, our resource industries that also contribute to the Canadian economy, and our governments accept the same accountability.

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Pandering to irrational consumer fears is short-sighted thinking

Food companies are setting production standards these days, not regulators, and the industry has to react

BY SHILOH PERRY

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF FARM BUREAUS

Food companies, food retailers, and farmers all face tremendous pressure to respond to consumer expectations on issues like animal care, environmental protection, and the healthfulness and safety of products.

Agriculture has always adapted in response to market preferences. The remarkable growth in organic agricultural production shows that farmers and ranchers will grow what consumers are willing to pay for, especially if it helps them become more profitable.

Companies often make quick decisions to differentiate their brands and products without fully evaluating the impacts of their policy changes. Often they

put out announcements about changing their production practices — changes that might not take effect for many years but provide an immediate halo effect — after sales fall or when trying to overcome a public relations crisis concerning their products or practices. This happens more and more these days now that agricultural policy is being made by unelected corporate executives.

Of course companies listen to their customers, but they also need to think about their suppliers and the impact of their decisions. Too often the direction a company takes is based on misinformation and a broad misunderstanding of agriculture. The results: corporate sourcing standards that insist farmers and ranchers raise their crops and animals in ways that are less efficient, possibly less

humane, and definitely less sustainable.

A recent example is Dannon's move to non-GMO feed for its dairy cows in the U.S. The company's efforts were part of a commitment to sustainability, but the impact was a broad-based move away from biotechnology — meaning lower crop yields, more tilling of the soil, and more use of insecticides and stronger herbicides than the ones widely used by farmers today. This amounts to less sustainability, not more.

Agricultural groups tried to meet with Dannon to help the company's executives avoid making a mistake and understand why walking away from modern agricultural technology is not good for the company or its customers. We were turned down, so the groups sent Dannon a letter.

"Under the guise of providing consumers more choices," the groups wrote, "your pledge would force farmers to abandon safe, sustainable farming practices that have enhanced farm productivity over the last 20 years while greatly reducing the carbon footprint of American agriculture."

Dannon is not the first or only company to make such announcements without fully evaluating the impacts. Too many companies have barrelled forward, rather than listening to farmers and ranchers who could have helped them make better decisions.

Now agriculture is speaking up and explaining our narrative. The voice of agriculture is being heard. We are engaging with food companies to help them see all of the on-the-ground consequences.

When they do not listen, as with Dannon, we call out their actions for what they are. Often their actions are simply based on "fear-based marketing."

Farmers and ranchers have a great story to tell on sustainability. The technologies we use are tested and proven safe and beneficial for farm productivity and the environment. From 1980 to 2011, U.S. rice production grew more than 50 per cent, even as irrigation water used per acre dropped 25 per cent, to cite just one example.

It is time for more food companies and their customers to hear about those results and learn about the true sustainability of modern agriculture.

Shiloh Perry is a communications assistant with the American Federation of Farm Bureaus, and this article is part of the organization's Viewpoint series.