



**Eight (Sustainable) Objections:
Arguments Challenging Certification and Metrics for
Marketing “Sustainability” in Agriculture**

By Mark Lipson

Author’s Note: *The first, rough version of this work-in-progress was delivered as a talk at Asilomar during the 2009 Ecological Farming Conference on January 23. This article sharpens some of the points I made at Asilomar and blunts some others.*

I too-cleverly titled the talk, “Eight Reasons Why I Won’t Work on Certification and Measurement for Marketing of ‘Sustainable Agriculture’ (and Neither, Perhaps, Should You).” Having provoked some spirited arguments worth propagating, of course now I am working on the subject so I have had to “eat my title words” as it were. (Argh).

I very much appreciate the conversations that took place at the conference, and thank the other panelists Cliff Ohmart, Jonathan Kaplan and Terry Betts Young, and also Chuck Benbrook, in particular, for helping me clarify my thinking. Some good counter-arguments were raised during the session and we should continue those chains of thought.

Introduction

An email circulating last summer among the leadership of the national Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was entitled something like, “More Sustainability Marketing Initiatives Than You Can Shake a Stick At.” Indeed there is an explosion of processes underway to define again, measure, audit and thus mass-market the term (or just the halo) of “sustainable agriculture”.

For a variety of reasons, the coalitions of farmers, policy advocates, organizers and educators who have explicitly struggled against the non-sustainability of American agriculture for decades are mostly *not* in favor of these efforts. In response to a leading example - the initiative currently proceeding under the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) - about 75 national leaders and pioneers of sustainable and organic agriculture signed a letter last summer listing objections to the process and premises of that effort

As the designated contrarian for the 2009 EcoFarm Conference panel on this topic, I would like to offer my own version of those objections. I was a signer to that ANSI opposition letter and most if not all of these critiques are not original to me. However, this piece is my own expression and emphasis, so only I am to blame for any lack of clarity.

My goal, at least, is to force examining the assumptions underneath the various sustainable ag mass-marketing initiatives and investment plans. I recognize that most (though not all) of these efforts are sincerely founded in the hope of rewarding some progress away from some non-sustainable aspects of our food system. My hope is that we will get past this argument about marketing relatively quickly and focus a lot more effort on the actual destination: inventing and scaling up regional, diversified, zero waste, nontoxic, socio-economically healthy, resilient, ecological food systems.

Certifying Sustainability A Bad Idea

For the reasons stated below, I think that *certifying* products for mass markets as “sustainable agriculture” is a bad idea in its own right, without qualification. The idea of “metrics for sustainability” is not objectionable on principle, but *as a platform for market claims* such “metricification” is still probably misleading. In any case, marketing these metrics is a mistake in terms of the payoff for the effort involved. The less grandiose end of this spectrum seems to mean just implying, “at least making some progress on the way to sustainability.” But with this approach the ratio of meaningful outcomes to effort required is inherently going to be too small. Not zero, but not nearly big enough.

Not Protecting Organic Label

To clear up any mistaken assumptions about where I’m coming from, I want to say that my critique is *not* mainly about protecting the certified organic label or organic producers in the marketplace. At most that is a secondary consideration. I have always stated very directly that high-grade organic farms – i.e., building essentially non-toxic, renewably fertile, diversified agro-ecological systems – are *necessary* but not alone *sufficient* for anything that might be called “sustainable agriculture.” We only have a few thousand of those high-performance organic farms, but they are still the strongest platform we have for moving towards a paradigm that could be called sustainable. I am concerned about low-payoff distractions from the *substance* of improving organic systems and scaling them outward, but not from a marketing standpoint. That is, because I am convinced that we need much more than the marketplace to achieve the values of sustainability, I am not so worried about the competition-with-organic aspect of the “sustainable” label schemes.

The relationship between the agro-ecological ideals and Certified Organic labels in the legally defined marketplace is highly complex, somewhat perverse, and not well studied. Personally I think the Certified Organic experiment in marketing to incentivize values is falling far short of its potential but still worth salvaging. I think that salvage effort likely has a reasonable payoff in enabling systemic change.

A related note: For better or worse, the Certified Organic label is the essential case study on using the food marketplace as a vehicle for inducing changes on the ground. Generally I think the wrong lessons are being drawn by the advocates of a “sustainable agriculture” marketing standard, and I will try to make some brief illustrations of that.

Eight Main Objections

So here are my eight main objections to the “sustainable agriculture” mass-marketing initiatives.

No. 1 – Basic Conceptual Fallacy

“Sustainable Agriculture” can only be meaningful over a long period of time, certainly lifetimes if not many generations. It is just basic intellectual error (or dishonesty) to apply the term to anything measured at a point in time, or even over any span of time that is relevant to the world of commerce. It can only be logically applied in retrospect, and no human civilization has yet been around long enough to earn the tag. This basic fallacy is one of Fred Kirschenmann’s main points on our topic and this fundamental disconnect cannot be overstated.

No. 2 – Historical Dilution of the Term

The phrase, “Sustainable Agriculture” has been the active object of argument in the policy and scientific arenas for about 30 years. The first legislative conflicts over sustainable agriculture policy date back to 1982. In this ongoing battle, the term by itself has largely been neutralized as far as representing a fundamental critique of toxic industrial agriculture. Almost every kind of agricultural technology or practice is readily claimed and accepted as “sustainable” by scientists and officials without a trace of irony. The recent mass media simplification and business-world bandwagon for “sustainability” are not, IMHO, a good sign for thinking that the term is freshly rehabilitated for leveraging significant change via the marketplace. Until it is, it should not be sold off and merchandised, even by “green” venture capital.

(Here there are mixed and contradictory lessons from the history of organic, too many to unpack here but that needs to be done. See topic No. 4)

These first two objections alone should be sufficient for discrediting the notion of certifying “sustainable agriculture.” That goal ought to be a non-starter on a strategic level. The remaining arguments might be called tactical, i.e. even if you believed it was still necessary to *try* for a meaningful “sustainable” label, I argue that current concepts won’t get there. This applies not only to the ANSI project, but also to many of the “metrics” efforts, at least in so far as they are directed at enabling mass-marketplace claims.

The next part of the list (Nos. 3 through 8) adds up to this: **ITS NOT WORTH THE EFFORT.** Too little impact, too many pitfalls, too late and too much distraction from what we really need to be doing. The ratio of outcomes to the cumulative time and money and brainpower required is not enough, given the scope of change that is needed. These market-incentive constructs will require lots of effort, and lots of negotiation, but the results will not likely produce *systemic* change on the ground.

No. 3 – Inevitable Default to “Common Easiest Achievables”

At best, the bars of achievement that will be set for the “sustainable food” labels won’t be high enough to deserve the term. At worst they are going to enable a lot of green-wash, helping the world stay in denial and feel less bad about the damage that is being done by and to our food systems. There are several aspects of this default, but a main one is that setting these standards or metrics will come down to a political-economic negotiation among various stakeholders, as opposed to a systematic assessment based on empirical social and natural science. That is, the need for political and economic inclusiveness and “consensus” will trump the need for being driven by the science. This tendency is made exponentially worse by how underdeveloped we are in the relevant bodies of science and technologies.

This is an important lesson from the organic experience. All the lameness in the organic standards and the fiascoes of compliance have their roots in the retarded state of ecological science, education and technology. Our collective knowledge development lags far behind the rapid growth of the market and the spasmodic proliferation of regulatory apparatus. Reversing that lag, having science lead the markets and measurements, should be the focus of our attention.

No. 4 – “The Market” is Not as Powerful as You Might Think

Consumers are fickle, retailers are opportunistic, producers are fragile and they can't always respond to the indirect proddings of market signals. The lesson we need to realize from the organic saga is how limited the market-place “carrot” really is for changing agriculture on the ground. Thirty years of massive effort to cobble together a still-incomplete organic certification system, covering only about one-half of one percent of US agricultural lands, (even then with a lot of low-grade organic in arrested transition) should be suggesting that “the market” is actually an insufficient tool for widespread significant change in the food system. We lack strong research and development, we lack sane regulation of toxic assault, and we lack structural social supports for real stewardship of our resources. Changing those conditions is what we need to concentrate on.

No. 5 – Whatever the Standards, Compliance is Costly and Prone to Failure

Complex and subjective verification processes for market standards are easily undermined over time. These schemes will be undone by mission-drift, corruption, dilution, apathy, mercenary certifiers, misleading marketing, etc.

There may be no cost-effective way to overcome this inherent weakness. The organic certification system is facing its own existential challenges on this level. Among other issues, it appears that there is a direct correlation between the rigor of market-reward standards on paper, and the cost of maintaining integrity of compliance with those standards. With some new competence in our governments, the organic label may yet find the sweet spot of fidelity to its ideals matched with reliably cost-effective verification, but it may not. It's a lot of overhead to even try to do it right. For the “sustainable” labels the overhead cost is not likely to be tolerable over time for mass mainstream business, especially in a depressed economy.

Having mentioned our current economic downdraft, let me digress briefly to add further context for the last three objections. The calculation of effort/outcome ratio requires being clear about what is at stake, what outcomes are essential to aim for. The multiple crises of the food system can't be separated from the momentum towards a cascade of human/ecosystem/climate tipping points. (I would go through some of the list but this talk is already too depressing...) That is the background against which we have to decide what to work on. These last three objections are driven by that background.

No. 6 – “Sustainability” is a Systemic Attribute, Not Described by Reductive Linear Measurements

Mass-market “metric-incentive” approaches tend strongly to be reductionistic, linear, non-systemic, non-holistic. In short, very 20th century! I think we should agree that pretty much all of our agriculture is *systemically* non-sustainable. If so, the corollary is that progress towards sustainability has to be measured on a systems level.

Sustainability cannot be reduced to a linear set of negotiated attributes. Furthermore, linear progress along the scale of any metric cannot be determined to be making a *systemic* difference. In this case, the marketing of the metrics sells an illusion of systemic improvement but cannot provide that.

I am not saying that we should not be measuring numerous attributes as diagnostics. In our urgent quest to understand underlying system behavior and the tipping points of system failure, key measurements are vital. True full-cost accounting for farms and watersheds and value chains would be a great thing to have, and if we had been driving at that for the last twenty years we would surely be in a lot better shape on a lot of fronts.

No matter how many parts you are recording and measuring and attempting to score, that is not describing the state of the system. We have to develop whole-system measurements, i.e., *inherent qualities of health*. “Meta- metrics” if you will, perhaps. I don’t see too much of that in the current efforts. Let’s spend a few years on that and then talk about certifying sustainability.

Again, I will argue that advanced organic agriculture is the best laboratory we have for developing effective whole-system measurements and management. It’s not even a complete foundation, but it’s the furthest project along that can serve as the platform.

No. 7 – Shifting Baselines Undermines Premise of “Sustainable Metrics Progression”
Related to the paradigmatic objection in No. 6, there is the fallacy of scoring increments of linear progression against a rapidly shifting environmental and social context. If “sustainability” means anything it means proving to be resilient and successfully adaptable in the face of changing context. But that background is changing very rapidly. Systemic instability undermines the idea that you can meaningfully talk about (and market) “net progress towards more sustainability” with a slow-moving (delicately negotiated) set of linear measurements.

No. 8 – The Real Work Going Undone: Accelerating Paradigm Shift

If there were no need to prioritize our efforts, these objections would matter a lot less. But I believe the opportunity cost is high. These things are distracting and subtracting from discovering, inventing, designing, building and replicating truly non-toxic, non-greenhouse, fair, humane, renewable, HEALTHY systems.

We don’t have a lot of time to get on that. The ecosystem and human health tipping points are real. We should be inspired and energetic about accelerating a paradigm shift in agriculture, focus on advancing the science and technology of regenerative agro-ecosystems, reward ecosystem services as a matter of public policy and be forceful about direct public action with respect to the worst damage. Certifying “sustainability” is itself an illogical goal and mainstream lesser-evil metric-carrot incentives are a low-payoff use of time, money and brainpower.

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