



## Farms, Forks and Feuds on the Road to Sustainable Agriculture

content by [GreenBiz.com](http://GreenBiz.com)

By Stephen Linaweaver and Andrew Collier at [Greener World Media](http://GreenerWorldMedia.com)  
Tue Aug 17, 2010 1:00am EDT

Food is precious and perishable. There are specialty crops that generate exorbitant profits and commodities with razor-thin margins. Farmers are squeezed on one side while subsidies lead to surplus on the other.

One watershed lacks enough nitrogen for growth while another is choked with excess fertilizer draining into an estuary dead zone. Too much water brought floods in the Midwestern U.S. and sent corn prices soaring in June; not enough water meant [Russia](http://Russia) burned and wheat prices leapt by 50 percent in July.

The New York Times covers obesity in Dallas and malnourishment in Djibouti with the same objective, detached tone. The average American spends less than a tenth of personal expenditure on food. The average Indonesian? Over half.

Agriculture is extremely complicated. Adding sustainability to the mix makes it more so. The Sustainable Agriculture Partnerships 2010 Conference, held last week in San Francisco, attempted to cover this thorny topic. The gathering included farmers, food processors, crop science companies, coffee growing cooperatives from Nicaragua and brand name firms you find in your kitchen cabinet. Combining all actors in one room to discuss food needs in a growing world provided a unique glimpse into the challenges faced when implementing sustainability. There were four areas in particular we can draw on:

### 1. Frankness

The conference provided the opportunity for a degree of frank discussion rarely found at sustainability conferences. Farmers who manage 28 acres in Marin County to 3,000 acres in Wisconsin roamed the carpeted hotel ballroom. They brought a degree of reality often sorely missed. After all, when was the last time you attended a sustainability conference that included Chinese shop floor managers or parts distributors? One farmer from Australia confronted a panel member, bluntly, "I can't feed the world without a higher price," looking to one of the large food buyers to help bear some of the cost of reducing environmental impacts. Talking frankly about the costs of sustainability, who bears them, and who reaps the benefits, is something that needs to be discussed more often, whether in reference to Walmart's Sustainability Questionnaire or to other certifications.

## 2. It's Not About the Factory

"It's an open system, not a factory," Kevin Rabinovitch from Mars mentioned on the first day. Instead of focusing on the supply chain, there was a full acknowledgment that actions along the entire value chain have relevance in the discussion. Farmer, food processor, brand manager and retailer -- each have to manage tradeoffs and none can absorb the full costs of shifts towards sustainability alone. This focus on "farm to fork" makes everyone responsible for educating consumers, and helps to ensure investing in sustainability will be understood, valued and paid for at the consumer level.

## 3. The Big Picture

The food industry is thinking big. Betsy Cohen from Nestle shared a chart showing that the malnourished population of the world is growing, not declining, and recently surpassed 1 billion. Agriculture as an industry is being asked to be sustainable at the very moment it needs to provide more with less, three decades on from the Green Revolution. Reducing the armies of malnourished is ambitious, yes, but it makes the link between environmental, social, and economic challenges in a way that singular, sometimes arbitrary, company goals around carbon or toxins do not. We all need to keep an eye on the big picture goals, so as not to confuse activity with progress.

*Next Page: Why partnerships matter and what the dairy industry has done.*

## !-pagebreak--4. Partnership Matters

There were several innovative partnerships of note:

Burgerville, a Pacific Northwest restaurant chain, worked with the Natural Beef Co-Op for over four years and now sources 100 percent of its beef there. It took time and patience to bring enough ranchers into the co-op and achieve the needed scale, and Burgerville was there from the beginning to provide the incentive and confidence the ranchers needed. Major buyers providing clear intent, steadfast commitment and continued support from the outset can move markets, but only if that commitment lasts beyond the quarterly analyst cycle.

Maintaining that big picture mentality, Mars has a vision of "a sustainable cocoa industry where farmers, their families and communities benefit and nature is conserved." Mars has made a commitment to purchasing 100,000 tonnes of UTZ certified cocoa annually by 2020. UTZ certified enhances professional farming and strives to have a positive impact on productivity, quality and efficiency. Mars has also committed to purchase 100,000 tonnes of cocoa from Rainforest Alliance certified cocoa farms. By broadening its stakeholder reach beyond one main partner, Mars benefits from expertise across multiple regions and can

quickly apply lessons from one program or commodity to another.

One thing you do not see every day is major competitors sitting down at the same table, talking about challenges they face, and then dividing up the tasks and getting down to work.

Yet that is exactly what the dairy industry has done. They commissioned an LCA scan of their carbon impact, led by BluSkye Sustainability Consulting and the University of Arkansas, that produced a "directionally correct footprint that fundamentally changed our industry", according to Erin Fitzgerald, VP of sustainability at the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy.

The study identified crop and milk production as by far the largest carbon impact in the dairy value chain, and U.S. Dairy has since laid out seven major initiatives, with different companies taking ownership for each, to address these impacts.

Competitors collaborating -- whether major entertainment companies working together to reduce DVD packaging or food companies reducing GHG emissions of milk production -- remains an innovative and largely untapped tool for sustainability implementation.

One participant of the 2010 Sustainable Agriculture Partnerships conference asked the group on the second day, "Is it responsible for a food producer to listen to a well-fed consumer on how to feed a hungry world?"

The same could be said of energy and water and other corners of the sustainability debate. The world is hungry for a lot of things. And the food industry is not perfect. But they are starting to face head-on some of the challenges others are skirting. And they are starting to have awkward and uncomfortable conversations, which is typically where activity stops and progress begins.

*Stephen Linaweaver is an associate principal and Andrew Collier is a senior analyst at GreenOrder, an LRN company. GreenOrder is a strategy and management consulting firm that helps companies achieve competitive advantage through environmental innovation.*

*Image CC licensed by Flickr user Let Ideas Compete.*

Click [here](#) to view the online version.