

Sustainable Agriculture

Pat Mesec—08-09

“Sustainable agriculture” as legally defined in the U.S. Code Title 7, Section 3101 means an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will over the long term:

- a) satisfy human food and fiber needs,
- b) enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends,
- c) make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls,
- d) sustain economic viability of farm operations,
- e) enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.

The basic goals of sustainable agriculture are environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity. *Sustainability rests on the principle that we must meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.* Stewardship of both natural and human resources is of prime importance. A systems perspective is essential because it provides the tools for exploring the interconnectedness of the agricultural continuum from producer to consumer.

After World War II, mechanization, new technologies, increased use of chemicals, specialization, and government policies all favored mass production of food and fiber. Mass production tended to lead to the decline of both the family farm and the accompanying rural communities. A broad array of issues has grown to surround the “factory” farms of today. These issues include the use of antibiotics and pesticides which contribute to water pollution and the growing problem of antibiotic –resistant bacteria. There are animal welfare concerns and the fact that industrial agriculture has led to degradation of the soils and the rapid decrease in the world’s biodiversity.

Universities, notably UC/Davis and Iowa State University, have been conducting research and have had programs relating to sustainable agriculture for over twenty years. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) is a national alliance of farm, rural development, and conservation groups that organized in 2009 to affect federal agriculture policy. NSAC’s vision of agriculture is one where a safe, nutritious, ample, and affordable food supply is produced by a legion of family farmers who make a decent living pursuing their trade, while protecting the environment and contributing to the strength and stability of their communities.

Farmers across the country can join a group called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Such farms sell shares in their annual crops and the “shareholders” collect in weekly produce. Some are very successful.

Sources; <http://sustainableagriculture.net>, www.sustainabletable.org, UC/Davis website.

