



EXTENSION

College of Agriculture,
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Characteristics of Sustainable Agriculture Producers

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Introduction

Sustainable agriculture is a term that seems to generate a great deal of discussion and confusion. Ikerd (1990) describes sustainable agriculture operations as ones that are “capable of maintaining productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely. Such systems must be resource-conserving, socially supportive, commercially competitive, and environmentally sound.”

Agriculture in Nevada has undergone changes over the last several decades that suggest it might not meet the definition above. From 1974 to 2002, total Nevada farm area declined from 10,814,000 to 6,330,622 acres and the average farm size decreased from 5,209 to 2,266 acres (Census of Agriculture, 2002). However, there seems to be a development that casts an encouraging light on this downward trend. A new breed of producer has emerged, which appears to possess the ability to overcome hurdles the agriculture industry faces today. Although it might be too early to tell, since sustainability denotes an indefinite time period, these producers may represent the next generation for agriculture.

What do these sustainable agriculture producers have in common? This fact sheet describes common characteristics exhibited by six innovative Nevada agriculture producers. Characteristics contributing to sustainability were observed and documented by professionals from University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washoe Tribe, and Bureau of Indian

Affairs on a sustainable agriculture tour in western Nevada in 2004. These characteristics were summarized and organized under three aspects of sustainability - social, economic and environmental. Other agriculture producers may find these characteristic descriptions helpful, as they have contributed to the sustainability of six fellow Nevada producers.

Social aspects of sustainability

Actively communicate with others – Producers proactively share their philosophies, practices, and lessons learned with others. These conversations occur on the phone, via e-mail, and in person across the fence, and at farmers’ markets, conferences and other gatherings. Their agricultural operation is often on the top of their mind and thus the topic of discussion. Producers often seek information and ask questions in conjunction with describing their trials and tribulations. As a result of these active communications, they build and maintain many relationships.

Are hungry for education – Sustainable producers exhibit an insatiable hunger for educational materials. Trade journals, Internet sites, and educational seminars are sought after in search of new information to help grow their business. Continuing education through self teaching seems to become second nature as producers are naturally drawn to information. Producers do not view education as laborious or painstaking. Rather, they look forward to it and seek it.

Are motivated, determined, and passionate – Producers are tenacious in making their business

succeed. This trait is demonstrated by consistent, focused attention to critical business aspects. A genuine passion that hinges on obsession is apparent. Others find this characteristic to be attractive and infectious to some degree.

Are not broken by regulation – Rather than complain about and be stifled by regulations, sustainable producers are willing to work with government, community groups, and regulatory agencies to meet red tape head-on, despite the pain and suffering. Willingness to forge through regulation barriers may be a result of intense motivation and passion to excel. Producers hold their tempers in check, systematically investigate regulation details, learn the intended purpose, discuss alternative solutions with authorities, and craft a means of working through regulation obstacles. Producers do not often look back at these difficult moments fondly but they do recognize them as growth opportunities.

Are prideful, yet open – Sustainable producers feel good about the job they are doing and the direction they are going, but always make room for improvement. They are open to alternative approaches and ask many questions, because they are not stuck in the quagmire of tradition. There seems to be pride, particularly in progressiveness.

Economic aspects of sustainability

Make the pie bigger – More consumers, more producers, more diversity, and more profits for all is the philosophy of sustainable producers. This stems from having an abundance mentality, as opposed to a scarcity mentality. Rather than focusing on what is in it for them and only them, sustainable producers are conscious of a bigger world, larger market, higher demand, and opportunity for all. As they share information with others, they are helping others to succeed and sharing their success.

Take calculated risks – As business decisions are made and actions are implemented, some degree of risk is present. Sustainable producers

understand that in business, making no changes is often more risky than making incremental changes. Doing business as usual, the way granddad did it, is not an option. Thus, producers take premeditated or calculated risks to address changing conditions. Changes must be made, and risks must be taken, but these actions are thought through and not made haphazardly.

Start small – Sustainable producers take risks on a small scale to ensure economic viability. They continually test new ideas, but rather than risking the farm, so to speak, they institute costly ideas and new practices in small doses to test the water. They might lease expensive equipment until a time when profits prove it wise to purchase the equipment. Sustainable producers avoid accumulating unmanageable debt.

Goal oriented – When asked what they would like to accomplish this year for their business, sustainable producers can rattle off a number of goals without thinking twice. Typically, the goals are realistic in size and scope, and efforts are underway to meet those goals. Status quo is not in the vocabulary of sustainable producer. When asked to describe what their business will look like in five years, they never balk, but rather begin to describe a business with a different complexion.

Use dream polish – Dream polish is a combination of business pride and attention to detail. Logos, brands, and customized work clothes add an enhanced level of professionalism to the business. This attention to detail adds a certain spit shine that customers recognize and appreciate. With wild creativity and over active passion, dream polish ideas are continually flooding the minds of sustainable producers.

Everything must generate income – Sustainable producers constantly contemplate how to convert costs to income. Anything on the farm or ranch that is not earning money is thought of as a liability. Making best use of all resources is critical to sustainable producers. Nothing should

go to waste. Waste is a red flag word. This is not to suggest that all waste is put to profitable use, but sustainable producers are continually stewing over ways to do so.

Use innovative marketing strategies – Not content with traditional market outlets, sustainable producers are continually learning about new markets and ways to perfect their marketing. They have a keen understanding of market details and finely tune product preparation, presentation, and distribution.

Typically, are not highly profitable – Sustainable operations typically do not produce vast wealth. Most often, profits cover expenses, owners earn a decent wage, modest investments are made back into the business, and debt is reduced or properly managed. Sustainable producers work very hard and dedicate considerable energy, but in return, they are compensated with enough profit to support a family, pay the bills, and grow the business.

Environmental aspects of sustainability

Are stewards of natural resources – Sustainable producers understand the importance of natural resource health for today, tomorrow, and all concerned. They routinely test soil and give much attention to soil health. They use practices that protect water quality and prevent soil erosion.

Develop an observant eye – “Are you seeing what you are looking at?” one sustainable producer asks. This means that there is more to be seen if one thinks differently or learns to look from a different perspective. To the average agricultural producer, the presence of weeds

triggers a typical “get-the-spray- rig” response. To sustainable producers, weeds suggest an environment out of balance and a need to evaluate the practice or goals. Essentially, an observant eye enables one to read environmental health indicators and make ecologically sound decisions.

Conclusions

How many of these characteristics fit your business style? If agriculture sustainability is a concern, it might be worthwhile to read through this fact sheet again to identify ways you could change. Nevada agricultural producers may reverse the trend of declining sustainability by adopting these characteristics.

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