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ANLA: Bob's View

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A Sustainable Standard for Sustainable Agriculture

This is column No. 3 on the subject of sustainability. The basis for these columns is the American Nursery & Landscape Association’s on-going strategic objective of exploring sustainability and its impact on the industry. My December 2007 column focused on the Sustainable Site Initiative (SSI).

There’s a second initiative underway to develop an industry standard for sustainable agriculture. Its proponents are hopeful that this standard can be developed through a process that will earn recognition by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Incidentally, ANLA oversees the continual evolution of the ANSI Standard for Nursery Stock.

The organization most significantly behind developing the sustainable ag standard is California-based Scientific Certification Systems (SCS). This for-profit company engages principally in certifying product compliance to industry standards. SCS is a principal certifier for the timber industry’s Forest Stewardship Council, as well as Veriflora, a rapidly emerging certification for flowers. It is SCS’s experience with Veriflora that is behind the move to extend the Veriflora concept to all of agriculture in the form of a standard for sustainable agriculture.

Presumably, were there to be an ANSI-recognized sustainable agriculture standard, a certifying company like SCS would then be hired by agriculture production firms to certify their farm products as complying with the sustainable standard. Smart business people these are.

OFA, SAF and OFA are all learning as much as we can about this developing program. We'll be working together to ensure that the industry is represented in the creation of a standard that may eventually morph into a consumer-sought “seal of approval” of our plants grown according to a sustainable standard.

An ANSI-approved standard must follow a prescribed process of standard writing that takes no longer than three years. As of December 2007, the process for this sustainable ag standard was at the six-month point. During those first six months, a draft standard of considerable detail has been published and is now available for your review on OFA’s website at www.ofa.org.

In addition to publishing a draft standard, a series of meetings and conference calls of “stakeholders” with an interest in the standard are being held. The initial participants came largely from environmental and labor groups, but as
word spreads about this pending standard, stakeholders with direct involvement in agriculture production are getting more engaged. And rightly so.

Many businesses in our industry may find some or even much to be concerned about with the content of this draft standard. Some of the criteria are going to be a steep climb for conventional ag producers. There are also criteria that are already fully expressed in state and federal law. In other words, compliance with those criteria is a given. What, then, is the purpose of including these criteria in such a standard? And with these criteria embedded in the standard, what are the implications when a non-governmental certifying agent, such as SCS, determines that these law-based criteria are not being met?

There are good and fully acceptable answers to these questions. It will be important to engage the drafters of this standard in an open-minded fashion and for them to return the favor. The ANSI standard-writing process requires that there be an opportunity for formal interaction among stakeholders. That interaction includes due process for filing inquiries and for the standard writers to provide their rationale for the draft language. Inquirers also have the right to file an appeal to ANSI, should the inquirers believe that the process of inquiry was short-circuited. Let’s presume for the moment that an ANSI-approved standard for sustainable agriculture can be developed that is agreeable to our industry stakeholders. The implications of such a standard could be significant. Among the positives would a third-party endorsement of what most businesses in our industry already believe: It makes good sense to engage in production practices that are sustainable over time and add value to our products. Such a program would also secure for us, in a new era, our reputation for being the industry that creates a managed environment that improves our lives in a natural and enduring fashion. Smart business people we are, too.

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