Sustainability and organic certification programs

offer opportunities to growers and their consultants

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Consumer interest in organic and other sustainably grown products continues to rise. Growers are changing farming practices to meet requirements of these market-driven programs. Many agricultural certification programs have rigorous standards that restrict pesticide and fertilizer use and may require producers to document multiple aspects of their operation such as pest management practices, fertilizer and water usage, recycling rates, and even greenhouse gas emissions. Adapting conventional production systems to comply with certification standards often poses significant challenges for producers. Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) who can tailor integrated pest management (IPM) recommendations and agronomic advice to local circumstances, especially those who understand the technical and financial support that the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide, are well positioned to help their clients adapt to the changing face of agriculture.

Many U.S. programs certify agricultural and forestry products, and the programs are diverse. Certification standards of the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) require producers to exhaust other pest management options before applying pesticides and prohibit the use of most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Biodynamic growers certified by Demeter USA must meet NOP standards while combining animal and plant production, applying certain soil and plant treatments, and correlating agricultural operations with natural cycles. The majority of certification programs, however, address some variant of a "3 E's" definition of sustainability: *environmentally* sound, socially *equitable*, and *economically* viable. Certification programs hire, train, and accredit auditors to verify grower compliance with program standards.

Certified Biodynamic produce for sale at the farmer's market under a banner displaying the Demeter and USDA Organic eco-labels. Photo courtesy of Cosmic Apple Gardens, Victor, ID.

Role of consultants

Organic production and other sustainable practices are knowledge and management intensive, and certified growers can benefit from consultant expertise. Cliff Ohmart, vice president of Professional Services for SureHarvest and board member of the certifier Protected Harvest,

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Lodi Rules certified winegrape grower gets agronomic advice about cover cropping. Photo by Lodi Winegrape Commission.

observes "A great way for CCAs to differentiate themselves from their competition is to offer services to growers who need help negotiating the requirements of market-driven and compliance-driven certification programs." Nutrient management, irrigation management, and IPM have a prominent place in most certification program standards. Protected Harvest certifies wine grapes grown by members of Lodi Rules, a certification program that requires written plans for all three management systems. Ohmart adds, "Helping a grower draft and implement a nutrient, irrigation, or pest management plan is one of the most important services a crop consultant can provide. Another key service is to help growers complete paperwork required for a certification audit, especially by creating, keeping, and organizing records of production practices used on the acreage to be certified." The trend is for sustainability certifications to become more comprehensive, addressing concerns such as energy efficiency and air quality. The qualifications of CCAs provide a strong foundation on which consultants can build expertise in specialty areas and offer those services to their clients.

Transitioning to organic

The knowledge and skills necessary to help a grower meet organic standards illustrate the value of consultant services. Conventional producers who "go organic" can work with a CCA to develop an Organic System Plan (OSP) that documents a farmer's use of organically approved practices. The certifier must approve the producer's OSP and conduct annual inspections prior to the NOP granting certification. Organic practices must be implemented for three years on fields before the crops produced may be sold as USDA Organic. The number of producers beginning this transition is increasing. Organic production of most major crops in the United States grew from 935,450 ac in 1992 to 5,838,119 ac in 2011, adding an average of 620 new organically certified operations each year (USDA-ERS, 2013).

"Successful transition requires extensive knowledge of the challenges a grower will face and the toolbox of available and proven cultural practices to cope with them," says Bill Wolf, President of Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates, a company that consults on organic and sustainability certification standards and OSPs. "Most people don't realize that organic production can only be successful in sites and climates appropriate to that crop. For example, California's Salinas Valley has a climate that addresses most strawberry disease pressures, yet even there, only some sites are appropriate for organic production. Transitioning to organic is very customized. Crop advisers must understand the local ecosystem, the crop, the marketing strategy, and how weather, soil health, and air flow affect pest pressures."

Farmers can streamline development of an OSP and manage costs of hiring a consultant for support through participation in USDA-NRCS conservation programs. Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs), offered through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, are a financial assistance tool to help producers plan the implementation of IPM, comprehensive nutrient management, organic transition, and other conservation practices. The CAP 138 Transition to Organic Plan, available in many U.S. states, is attractive because most of the expense for plan development is covered by NRCS and the plan is guaranteed

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Veriflora certified tulips at retail. Photo by SCS Global Services.

to meet NOP standards. Consultants must be qualified as a NRCS Technical Service Provider (TSP) before developing a CAP for a client. CCAs meet many of the baseline criteria to become a TSP and must develop a sample CAP prior to offering their planning services.

Benefits to the grower

The rewards of certification can be many, and the most compelling may not be financial. Many producers want to leave a lasting farming legacy, and recognition for good stewardship can be profoundly satisfying. A sustainability certification also creates opportunities to reap financial rewards that exceed certification fees and expenses. Organic and other sustainable practices can be more expensive to implement but often result in better management, higher yields, and superior product quality. Participation in certification programs makes value-added claims more credible and may increase market security, market share, and marketing opportunities. Producers sometimes receive higher prices for certified commodities. Certified organic products are a prominent example. Organic food sales in the United Sates grew from $3.6 billion in 1997 to an estimated $28 billion in 2012 (Greene et al. 2009; Greene 2013). Certified sustainably produced commodities may also be more valuable. For instance, some California wineries pay a premium for grapes certified under the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing.

Increasingly, governments, schools, hospitals, and food companies preferentially buy certified agricultural and forestry products. Some certification programs facilitate commodity sales through marketing agreements with food or forest product wholesalers and grocery retailers. SunWest, which markets California stone fruit and citrus under the "Zeal" eco-label, partnered with Hy-Vee, Inc. to supply Zeal fruit and in-store Zeal promotional materials for Hy-Vee's 232 Midwestern grocery stores. Other "green" marketing opportunities, such as direct sales of certified commodities at farmers' markets or through community-supported agriculture fresh produce delivery programs, are growing nationwide and can increase producer income.

Eco-labels that appear on certified products in retail stores are attractive to consumers. The green and white USDA Organic label is ubiquitous. And not all eco-labels are on food products. Fresh cut flowers and potted plants certified under the Veriflora program carry a label picturing a hummingbird with the words "certified sustainably grown." The Forest Stewardship Council sustainable production eco-label can be found on many products ranging from wood for construction to paper towels in supermarkets.

Investigating opportunities

Certified Crop Advisers have the background to support either side of the certification process by assisting clients applying for certification or working for the certification program itself as an auditor or in another role. Certification programs may operate globally, in multiple countries, in a single country such as the United States, or in a single U.S. state or region. The NOP certifies all agricultural commodities and certain forest products while other programs certify one or a few commodities.

Consultants interested in certification-related work should learn about programs that certify crops that interest them and their client growers. A good place to find information is the Consumer Reports website **greenerchoices.org** and its eco-label index **greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/labelIndex.cfm**. The IPM Institute of North America website, **ipminstitute.org/links.htm**, includes additional information about eco-labels and recognition for IPM. For information about the NRCS TSP program, see the NRCS TSP registry at **techreg.usda.gov**. Pay a visit to NRCS conservation specialists at your USDA Service Center to find out about technical and financial assistance available to local producers.

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