

**SPEAKING UP** *for*  
**AGRICULTURE**

**AND**

**COOPERATIVE**  
**SUSTAINABILITY**

The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives

# SUSTAINABLE

{*suh·stey·nuh·buh* l}

“of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged. *sustainable techniques. sustainable agriculture.*”

SOURCE: MERRIAM WEBSTER DICTIONARY



**SUSTAINABILITY  
IS IN THE SOUL  
OF EVERY GOOD  
FARMER AND AT  
THE HEART OF  
CO-OP SUCCESS.**



**THERE ARE NEARLY 60 MEMBER CO-OPS IN THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF FARMER COOPERATIVES (NCFC) AND NEARLY 60 DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE. THE TRUTH IS, SUSTAINABILITY MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE. IT MAY NOT EVEN MATTER IF EVERYONE AGREES ON A SINGLE DEFINITION, BUT ONE THING WE CAN ALL AGREE ON, AS OWNER-MEMBERS AND MANAGERS OF THE NATION'S COOPERATIVE SYSTEM, IS THAT SUSTAINABILITY IS AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT TO A GROWING NUMBER OF OUR CUSTOMERS, BOTH AT HOME AND ABROAD.**



Sustainability is a topic that is gaining momentum among the many companies who buy our agricultural products and who are ultimately being pushed toward sustainable sourcing by their own customers.

When many of our farmer-members hear the word “sustainability,” they often assume the conversation is only about environmental issues and additional government regulation. As a cooperative organization, it’s important to understand that protecting our natural resources is only one part of sustainable agriculture. As Merriam Webster reminds us, the word “sustainable” can and should apply to our financial, human and community resources as well.

Together with a core group of members, NCFC is establishing a common baseline understanding of how cooperatives and their members are practicing sustainability and providing resources to help members tell their own unique story of sustainable agriculture and food production.

The farmer-owned cooperative business model is an inherently sustainable one, and farmers themselves have been working over generations to ensure their own family businesses are sustainable. It’s time for agriculture – led by producers and their cooperatives – to take back the concept of sustainability. Before it was a buzzword, sustainability was in the blood of every good farmer and at the heart of co-op success, and it always will be.

The messaging provided in this document by NCFC is intended to help individual cooperatives take ownership of the discussion about sustainability and to help farmer-members understand why the topic is important to them. In reality, it is mostly a matter of taking credit for the practices and stewardship efforts cooperatives and farmers already have in place.

# SUSTAINABILITY: A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH FOR PROGRESS.

In order to be more productive, efficient and profitable, farmer cooperatives and their member-owners are continuously improving the ways they run their businesses. This continual progress is the driving component of sustainable agriculture in the three principle areas of **environmental, economic and community engagement**.

**FARMER COOPERATIVES HAVE A UNIQUE ABILITY TO DOCUMENT THIS PROGRESS USING THE FOLLOWING MEASURES:**

## **ENVIRONMENTAL**

- Water stewardship – use and quality
- Air quality – reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
- Soil health – nutrient management, erosion control
- Energy use – recycling, conservation, alternative sourcing
- Waste management – reduced packaging, recycling, use of byproducts
- Land efficiency

## **ECONOMIC**

- Financial performance
  - Job creation
  - Community economic impact
- Farmer profitability over multiple generations

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

- Worker well-being
- Animal well-being
- Community involvement
- Sustaining life
  - Healthy food
  - Product quality

**COOPERATIVES AND THEIR  
FARMER-MEMBERS OPERATE  
IN A SUSTAINABLE MANNER.**



# THE BUSINESS MODEL OF FARMER-OWNED COOPERATIVES IS INHERENTLY SUSTAINABLE.

- Cooperatives are owned by farmers who have been producing food and responsibly caring for their land and animals for generations
- Cooperatives share the financial value they create with their farmer-owners
- Farmer ownership throughout the value chain makes the cooperative business model an example of sustainability
- Cooperatives and their farmer-owners continually strive to improve their efficiency in energy usage, transportation, recycling of materials and repurposing of byproducts
- Cooperatives create and sustain quality jobs, businesses and consumer spending in their local communities



# FARMER-OWNED COOPERATIVES PROVIDE THEIR MEMBERS PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THAT HELP THEM PRACTICE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE.

- Cooperatives provide professional consultation to help their farmer-members apply research and technology to raise crops and livestock in a safe, healthy, efficient and sustainable manner
- Cooperatives work on their members' behalf to measure and, when necessary, aggregate production information needed to meet customer requirements throughout the supply chain
- Growers and livestock producers use research and technical assistance from their cooperatives to produce more with fewer resources, including energy, fertilizer, water and crop protection products
- Cooperatives provide farmers and ranchers with the education, technology, innovative products and services needed to help them continually improve the quality of the land they farm and the crops, produce, meat, milk and eggs they produce

# COOPERATIVES AND FARMERS HAVE A COMPELLING STORY OF SUSTAINABILITY.



## **IT IS IMPORTANT FOR FARMERS TO TELL THEIR INDIVIDUAL SUSTAINABILITY STORIES. COOPERATIVES CAN HELP MEMBERS WITH THE MESSAGING AND THE PROOF.**

- Customer requirements and expectations are putting pressure on cooperatives to address sustainability questions
- Telling the sustainability story is an important business practice for farmer-owned cooperatives; they can set the example for their members
- When co-ops tell the sustainability story, they are more relevant in the marketplace
- Proof of sustainability helps maintain farmers' ability to continue using practices that increase productivity and efficiency
- Cooperatives and their members have great stories to tell and should not shy away from telling them
- Co-ops can help members understand how they are being sustainable and why they need to tell their stories
- Cooperatives can speak collectively on behalf of their members, using aggregated information as proof points
- Cooperatives have a unique position to communicate about sustainability that non-co-op competitors do not
- Co-ops provide the opportunity for farmers to extend their influence further along the value chain
- Co-ops participate in public policy discussions about sustainability, representing the interests of farmers, producers and the food industry

## BECAUSE OF THEIR CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH MEMBERS, CO-OPS ARE UNIQUELY QUALIFIED TO HELP FARMERS TELL THEIR SUSTAINABILITY STORIES TO OTHERS IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN.

- Co-ops can be proactive in helping their members communicate about sustainable agriculture
- The co-op model of farmer ownership is itself an example of sustainable agriculture
- Co-ops represent a connection to farmers that consumers value
- Co-ops' close relationships with farmers help connect consumers to the farms that produce their food
- Co-ops offer a unique view of accountability, traceability and transparency from farm to plate

**Accountability:** Co-ops hold their members to high standards and can provide education and information on approved farming and animal care practices

**Local Sourcing:** Co-ops serve as a conduit between the farm and the consumer and can offer transparency regarding food production by explaining sustainability practices their members use on their farms

- Co-ops have been part of the rural landscape for generations and provide a historical perspective on the farmer's legacy of stewardship of the land and involvement in the community
- Co-ops have strong relationships within their communities and can communicate farmers' sustainability stories to a broader audience
- Because of their position in the food supply chain, co-ops can help farmers and consumers better understand each other

**For additional information about  
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