



**ANIMAL HEALTH, NUTRITION
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Defining sustainability: all about accurate data and the right metrics

Professor Michael Lee, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Harper Adams University
Dave Ross, Chief Executive Officer, Agri-EPI Centre
Judith Batchelar OBE, Director, Food Matters International Ltd



Sustainability has different components, and all should be considered to make solid claims if a product or business can be considered 'green' or sustainable. Using quality data and the right metrics form the basis

This was one of the conclusions drawn from the panel session: Supply Chain Transparency: The Complexities of Defining Sustainability, part of the Animal Health, Nutrition and Technology Innovation Europe 2024, in London. Panel moderator Michael Lee from Harper Adams University in the UK and panellists Dave Ross, CEO at Agri-EPI Centre and Judith Batchelar, OBE, Food Matters International Ltd discussed the challenges we see in eco labelling and how businesses deal with the sustainability topic.

Supplier push versus market pull

According to the FAO, the food chain is considered sustainable when it is profitable throughout all of its stages (economic sustainability), has broad-based benefits for society (social sustainability), has a positive or neutral impact on the natural environment (environmental sustainability).

“However, sustainability in the supermarket (what we see on the food label) is often approached by a single issue. The product is animal friendly, plastic free, or fair trade for example”, Judith Batchelar said. According to Batchelar, we also see that the concerns and motivations of consumers around sustainability are not always reflected in their purchasing behaviour. “Studies showed that consumers are willing to pay more for food products that have a quality premium (organic for example), but this is not always the case for other types of eco-labels. They also don't switch that easily to a different product. If we look at the health for example, we see that food producers have gradually reformulated products to make them less salty, sweet and fat. The products have stayed the same, but just got healthier. This is mainly pushed by the food companies themselves, rather than driven by a market pull. Same accounts for other sustainability items such as animal welfare and plastic reduction. The progress made here are also not necessarily the result of a consumer pull, but rather pushed by the suppliers.”

Quality and accuracy of data

Dave Ross addressed that quality and accuracy of the data is key when making claims about sustainability. Ross: “We need to remain critical on how and what we are measuring. Methane is an important greenhouse gas, and primary produced at (ruminant) farm level. But how do we measure methane emissions accurately, and are the current metrics still valid and internationally recognised? At Agri-EPI Centre this is one of our focus areas.”

Ross explained that the most commonly used metric to quantify greenhouse gas emissions (including methane) is still GWP100, which looks at the Global Warming Potential (GWP) of the greenhouse gases over 100 years. “But GWP100 assumes that all greenhouse gases are stagnant in the atmosphere, and remain there for centuries. This is not the case for methane. Methane is broken down in about ten years. This has led to a new metric (GWP*), which represent a more realistic understanding of methane and its impact. Having more accurate metrics like this are crucial to move the whole agrifood chain in the same direction. Because if you can’t measure it properly, you can’t manage it”, he said.

Batchelar added that using the same reporting mechanisms does not mean the reporting methodology is also the same. She addressed: “For example, while LCA is a increasingly used mechanism to calculate environmental impact (of feed, a farm, a business etc,) the different LCA calculation tools available may give other numbers (due to differences in the data and methodology). This is why I believe that the devil is in the detail around defining what the data points and standards are and should be, and how they can be collected in an a more automated way, and how the agrifood chain is going to pay for that collectively.”

From single to multi asset approach

While the society is moving to a more environment conscious future, the panel agreed that more work needs to be done to define and use the right metrics and make things simpler for the consumers.

Are the sustainability claims we make in the agrifood chain, and the corresponding food labels clear enough? Ross: “The driver for consumers to buy carbon neutral products is not huge at the moment. Maybe claims around carbon emissions are not tangible enough, compared to going for plastic free products. The latter might resonate more with being sustainable. The agrifood supply chain needs to understand what consumers are looking for and which information they wish to see.”

At the same time, we need to make sustainability claims in animal production more holistic. What does an animal welfare label say about the environmental impact of that product? Batchelar said: “You can’t look at a farm animal in isolation. A true sustainable farm is also about looking at soil health, animal health, welfare, water quality, product quality, social aspect, etc. Ideally, they should all be part of an eco-label. And this requires good quality input data again.”

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