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Agricultural Sustainability Standards Moving Toward the Finish Line

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In 2008, the Leonardo Academy embarked on process to facilitate the development of a national standard for sustainable agricultural cropping systems, under the rules of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) (<http://www.leonardoacademy.org/about/programs/sustainable-agriculture.html>). The ANSI standard development requirements provide for an open, balanced, and transparent standards-setting process that is internationally recognized. Accordingly, Sustainable Agriculture Standards Committee responsible for developing the principles, criteria and indicators defining sustainable agriculture is comprised for a diverse group of stakeholders—including farmers, food companies, retailers, trade associations, government representatives, environmental organizations, labor organizations, consumer groups, certifiers and academics. For information on how to participate in this standard development process or to act as an official observer to this standard development, see <http://www.leonardoacademy.org/programs/standards/agstandard/participate.html>.

In general terms, sustainability standard development involves the creation of overarching principles that are further refined by criteria and indicators. Although most commonly associated by the public with environmental issues, the development of a sustainability standard incorporates three areas: environmental, social and economic sustainability. All three elements are critical to a sustainable business operation. For example, without economic sustainability, a business attempting to engage in progressive environmental or social initiatives cannot survive and desired sustainability objectives will ultimately fail. Accordingly, the three subcommittees devoted to crafting principles, criteria and indicators for environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability work closely to integrate concepts across subject areas. The full Standards Committee subsequently reviews requirements proposed by the subcommittees. Another subcommittee has developed a reference library for sustainable agricultural standards (<https://sites.google.com/site/sustainableagstandards/referencelibrary>). More detailed information on the work of the various subcommittees work is available at <https://sites.google.com/site/sustainableagstandards/>.

Two weeks ago, this multi-year project concluded its fourth national face-to-face meeting of the multi-stakeholder Sustainable Agriculture Standards Committee at the Gap Corporate headquarters in San Francisco, California. At this meeting, the Standards Committee members voted to approve the principle statements, including criteria, indicators and metrics developed by the economic, environmental and social criteria development subcommittees. The next steps for this group will be further development and refinement of the criteria and indicators to measure sustainability.

The ANSI initiative described above, however, is not the only sustainability standard under development in the agricultural context. Biofuels are becoming subject to various levels of sustainability requirements as part of ensuring their “greenness” in relation to the fossil fuels they seek to replace. While the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels is attempting to develop and operationalize an international private standard for biofuels (see <http://rsb.epfl.ch/>), much work remains on whether and how such a standard would be viable in the nascent U.S. market. In that regard, the Council on Sustainable Biomass Production (CSBP) (see <http://www.csbp.org/>) is the leading U.S. sustainability standard under development for cellulosic biomass (e.g., non-food crops) intended for biofuel conversion and electrical power generation. The provisional standard currently is in the field testing phase (i.e., applying the proposed standard to a select group of farmers to ensure viability) and likely will emerge in 2012 as a third-party certification standard for growers and industry that caters specifically to the regulatory, economic, and social conditions unique to the United States.

On a related note, USDA has awarded its first Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) Project Area to Show Me Energy Corporation, whose Chairman, Steve Flick, also serves on the CSBP Board of Directors. This should provide a real-world opportunity for application of CSBP’s sustainability standards in the dynamic bioenergy market and advance standard development beyond abstract principles in order to monetize biomass’ favorable sustainable metrics.