

Abstracts

**Marketing Sustainable Agriculture Historic Perspectives; Present Need;
Future Hope**

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Abstract

As sustainability advocates work toward an economy that can be supported indefinitely, agribusiness holds a critical position on the pathway toward sustainability. While there are many examples of agribusiness serving as an environmental offender, the industry is also leading positive change through "value migration" that can set a powerful example for other industries. Agribusiness examples could also help encourage public demand for sustainable practices throughout industry. By learning from history, communicating the importance of sustainable agriculture and urging sustainable practices through aggressive marketing campaigns, agribusiness leaders have an opportunity to build business and lead the transition toward sustainability at the same time.

From an historic perspective, agriculture has a mixed environmental record. Until the industrial revolution, at least some indigenous peoples produced food through more or less "sustainable" practices. A TV special about a recently discovered South American tribe mentioned how they planted native crops in small clearings, harvested, moved on to other small plots for each crop, and returned to the starting point years later when the forest had replenished the soil. In North America, the Hopi people have ancient traditions that include heavy emphasis on farming in harmony with nature. The fact that indigenous practices work well only on small plots was no problem to the American pioneers, who found rich soil under grasslands further west, with enough nearby timber to build a growing nation. While history holds positive examples, it also shows how industrialization leads to social changes that put pressure on sustainability at the agricultural practice level.

Unfortunately, history is repeating itself, with the world's last rainforests and grasslands

yielding to bulldozers and plows. From every indication, resources vital to food production are running out. Last summer, a haze hung over the Midwestern U.S. for several days. The culprit: Forests being burned in Central and South America. From orbit, shuttle astronauts saw smoke stretching over the Amazon River basin for as far as they could see. Soils in many of those areas are poor for growing crops, so any agriculture there will be extremely input-intensive if it can work at all. Modern agriculture is utterly dependent on fossil fuels, which are a non-renewable resource. Even the soil itself is running out. Some experts estimate that since the mid-1900s, we are feeding two times as many people, with about 75 percent of the original topsoil. Even if we assume the best -- that technology will provide future answers to future crises, it's difficult to imagine that our current agricultural systems are sustainable without major changes. And while other industries are arguably expendable, sustainable agriculture is a challenge that is fundamentally vital to human existence. That's why leading the charge toward sustainability is more than an opportunity for agribusiness. If the industry cares at all for anything more than its bottom line, advancing the cause of sustainability at a public level is a moral obligation.

In fact, agribusiness may be able to make the most money by advancing sustainability concepts and numerous recent product innovations at the same time. After all, "economics" and "ecology" each have a linguistic basis in the same Greek word, for "house." Fortunately, modern agribusiness offers hope for economic and ecological sustainability. New technologies make it easier than ever to farm without tillage, keeping soil in place, reducing pollution and the need for fossil fuels. Through "clean technologies," agribusiness is reducing the need for insecticides, by placing pest protection within the genetic structure of the crops themselves.

The stage is set for agribusiness to advance sustainability by: 1, Encouraging pollution prevention at the farm level, by using "sustainability innovators" as positive examples; 2, By communicating about their product stewardship commitments -- and the resulting benefits -- at a meaningful public level; 3. By communicating the benefits of and creating a demand for clean technologies and practices.