

If You Are Not at the Table You are Likely on the Menu

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At the recent Farmers Cooperative Conference in Minneapolis there was a non-traditional topic: sustainability. NCFC Executive Director Chuck Conner discussed NCFCs work in developing a cooperative approach to the sustainability issue. There are many definitions of sustainability but it is generally described as “*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”. Most cooperative members would like to feel that their family farm operation is sustainable. At the same time they are apprehensive about the policies and regulation the issue may create. Cooperatives have a vital role to play in defining sustainability for their members. If we don’t become involved in defining our role in sustainability goals other will do it for us. Or in the words of one of the speakers at the conference “*If you are not at the table you are likely on the menu!*”

One of these efforts to get a seat at the table is called “Field to Market-The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture. It includes some names familiar to agriculture such as Land O Lakes, CHS, National Corn Growers Association, National Cotton Council, the Fertilizer Institute and John Deere as well as less familiar ones such as Environmental Defense Fund, The Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited. The coalition identified several interesting areas of common ground. One area is the interest in improving efficiency. Achieving higher yields through better genetics and better nutrient management addresses the challenge of meeting increased demand with limited resources. Cooperatives and their members are already involved in efforts such as nutrient stewardship, variable rate application and data driven decision making that are entirely consistent with this concept of sustainability.

A few years ago we heard discussion of globalization and concluded it would never impact our local cooperatives. Now we all see the impacts of a global market place. My prediction is that sustainability is another term we will hear more about. Farmer cooperatives and their members have a great story to tell about sustainability. We will need a place at the table in order to take part in the conversation.

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