

Paid content

About



Revamped sustainability assessment tool allows farmers to stay ahead of curve

As demands on farmers to feed an exploding population grow, a sustainability assessment tool is proving useful for those wishing for a competitive edge

Olivia McGill

Friday 6 May 2016 14.51 BST

Today's food and drinks companies are increasingly demanding sustainably produced raw materials. But many commodities have no sustainability standards and for producers of the ones that do, lengthy and varied assessments can be challenging and create confusion in the market.

More than words

As the need to feed an exploding population grows, Sustainable Agricultural Initiative (SAI) Platform, a global food and drink value chain initiative for sustainable agriculture, brings together companies at pre-competitive level to share knowledge and best practice on sustainable production. But SAI Platform and its members, suppliers and producers have gone beyond talking to create a sustainability assessment tool that informs producers what their buyers want and how to get it with minimum administrative disruption.

"Many leading food and beverage companies have made ambitious commitments to sustainable sourcing of agricultural materials," says Peter Erik Ywema, general manager of SAI Platform. "For most crops there are no standards available but if big companies start to create their own supplier codes around sustainability, they will confuse the market with different messages.

"SAI Platform has been testing, reviewing and developing an assessment tool that creates a single language the entire food chain can understand. The latest version of the Farm Sustainability Assessment (FSA) tool scales up and accelerates the transition to sustainable agriculture by providing a single benchmark for comparing existing codes, schemes and [is] a system that supports aggregating farming data across countries, commodities, and suppliers."

Benchmarking superiority

The FSA has been developed by food and drink companies, suppliers and farmers so is truly inclusive and has gone from niche to mainstream in just a few years, with 20 new companies coming on board in just one year, to a total of 80 member companies.

"Our increased membership indicates the appreciation of the tool's simplicity," says Ywema. "Many other assessments have 500 questions for farmers to fill in, this has about 100. To make it even easier, we have created a benchmarking system with many of the existing standards so there is no duplication of questions. We created a filter system so if you are certified by other assessment bodies, the questions that overlap will be removed. "

Farm focused

While the FSA was prompted by the needs of food and drink companies, farmers are intrinsically linked to the success of the process and SAI Platform works hard to make sure their interests are met.

"SAI Platform is unique because it focuses on advancing sustainability at farm level and communicates assurance through the value chain", says Ulrike Sapiro, SAI Platform's president. "Many companies buy through intermediate processors or traders, they can't always work directly with farmers. Just handing out company guidelines leaves farmers answerable to questions on standards from hundreds of different clients. The FSA provides a way to reduce the cacophony of people asking farmers for different things. It provides orientation on what companies collectively expect in terms of sustainable practices and gives companies leverage over their supply chain at a quicker pace."

Those responsible for creating the FSA have been careful not to add to work on the ground for producers.

"The FSA isn't in competition with existing schemes," says Sapiro. "There are a lot of assurance and certification schemes out there that are commodity specific. SAI Platform is trying to tie this together so if you are buying soya and using RSPO guidelines, you can see through the benchmarking how it compares to FSA."

Adaptable for all

So what have the benefits been to farmers and how has it been rolled out?

The tool was first created for the crop sector but Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board), and SAI Platform have adapted it for livestock by developing a beef FSA to be launched later this year. It will allow beef farmers to compare what sustainability means to SAI Platform's members versus what Bord Bia, through its sustainability programme, Origin Green, has been doing through its beef and lamb quality assurance scheme.

"All certification schemes to varying degrees incorporate sustainability metrics," says Jim O'Toole, chairman of the SAI Platform beef working group and director of the meat department at Bord Bia. "This tool will be a checklist of all the possible questions that people might want to inquire about sustainability practices.

"By using the FSA we can see the sustainability concerns customers of Irish beef have and they can see what Origin Green is doing to address them. All members are struggling with

the same thing - engaging the food industry in developing sustainable practices. FSA and the new web based platform that moves information aggregation from excel sheets to an easily navigable online system that can be shared with the whole supply chain, are important tools in the tool box."

While farmers are subject to a lot of demands, being able to assure sustainable practice is a competitive advantage they can't ignore.

Content on this page is paid for and produced to a brief agreed with Irish Food Board, sponsor of the food hub.

More advertisement features

Topics

Origin Green Ireland partner zone

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content