

Press release

Launch of international sustainability guidelines

A set of UN-developed measures of sustainability for the agricultural and horticultural sectors has been launched.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) launched the set of guidelines to assess the sustainability of food and fibre production. The Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agricultural Systems (SAFA) is a verifiable measure of sustainability that can be used in all sectors and across all levels of the production chain around the world.

New Zealand agricultural and horticultural products and processing facilities tested against a pilot version of the measures of sustainability have "come out extremely well" according to researchers contributing to the development of the indicators.

The New Zealand research team, led by Jon Manhire of the AgriBusiness Group in Christchurch, evaluated the SAFA prototype in 2013 by testing it on four different New Zealand enterprises that participate in the New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard research project. The performance of New Zealand vineyards, wineries, organic dairy farms and Ahika kai (indigenous food sold through a Ngai Tahu website), was compared with results from 30 other groups from around the world.

The SAFA indicators were fine-tuned at a meeting in Rome last March, and the revised guidelines just released have incorporated some of the modifications suggested by the New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard team. Jon Manhire was contracted by the FAO to assist with editing of these guidelines.

“It is great to see the FAO showing international leadership on the issue of benchmarking sustainable food production,” said Jon Manhire. “The meeting brought together a lot of groups from all production types with the goal of finding common ground in terms of sustainability assessment.”

“With over 200 different ‘green’ assurance or certification schemes on the market, consumers could be forgiven for confusion over claims of a product’s sustainability. From the pilot studies that New Zealand participated in, a database of relevant sustainability objectives and default sustainability indicators was developed which provides good information for exporters and others who want to reach the green consumer or understand their comparative performance across a wide range of sustainability dimensions,” said Professor Caroline Saunders of Lincoln University’s Agribusiness and Economic Research Unit.

“Sustainability can be assessed in many different ways and can mean many different things. As well as the measures that we usually use in New Zealand – indicators such as business profitability, pollution and water use – sustainability can also refer to the conditions of workers and other social factors. Economic resilience, rather than economic maximisation, is part of the SAFA approach,” said Professor Henrik Moller, from the Centre for Sustainability at the University of Otago.

“New Zealand scored highly in areas we often take for granted, such as our rule of law, labour legislation and environmental standards. Some of our farms are also relatively big compared to some in developing countries so we can achieve energy efficiencies through economies of scale,” said Moller.

New Zealand was the only country at the meeting to be represented by indigenous food producers. Dr John Reid assessed an indigenous food production and marketing pilot scheme established by Ngai Tahu and was able to suggest improvements so that the SAFA model better suited small scale family enterprises.

Consumers across the world will buy products not on price, but on perceived value based on food quality, safety, animal welfare concerns and sustainability issues, says Professor Saunders. A recent survey of consumers in India, China and the UK showed that Chinese and Indian consumers were more concerned with the environmental footprint of food and fibre production than their counterparts in the UK.

The New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard project is a six-year research programme which started in October 2012 and is funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment through the 2012 Biological Industries Research Fund.

For more information on Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA): <http://www.fao.org/nr/sustainability/sustainability-assessments-safa/en/>

Please note graphic at end of document

Contacts:

Jon Manhire, The AgriBusiness Group Ltd, jon@agribusinessgroup.com
03.365.6806; cell 0274.487.703

Dr John Reid, john.reid@canterbury.ac.nz 03.364.2987; 021.272.1369

Professor Henrik Moller, Centre for Sustainability at the University of Otago,
henrik.moller@otago.ac.nz; 03 479.9244; cell 027.2268.688

Professor Caroline Saunders, Agribusiness and Economic Research Unit,
Lincoln University, Caroline.Saunders@lincoln.ac.nz; 03 423.0382



The New Zealand Sustainability Dashboard

