



# Finding real green

By Andrew Rodman.

There is increased public demand for “sustainable” and “socially responsible” products, and more businesses touting practices and products as “green,” “carbon neutral,” and “fairly-traded” in the organic marketplace.

At the same time, companies are looking for ways to increase efficiency across the board to remain healthy in a down economy.

The smart companies are the ones that are achieving both.

One tool that companies have is by partnering up with the Food Trade Sustainability Leadership Association (FTSLA), a new non-profit that offers a variety of valuable educational programs, including strategies for measurement and reporting, strategy and goal setting, zero waste, carbon footprint reduction, sustainable packaging, renewable energy, resource conservation, ethical practices, marketing/communications and more.

Natalie Reitman-White, FTSLA Executive Director states that, “We have a long way to go to achieve resilient sustainable food systems. We continue to depend on many nonrenewable and polluting resources (i.e. fossil fuel) in our operations, and over-harvesting of precious natural resources (i.e. soil degradation & fresh water). The organic food trade provides a strong platform for advancing sustainability—based on principles of agro-ecology and biodiversity, avoiding toxic and persistent inputs nature cannot process, deriving most fertility from renew-

able sources. Our goal is to bring these principles into the entire business model from seed to plate.”

The FTSLA’s “Sustainability Tool Kit” gives members practical advice and strategies for implementing a sustainability program from step 1, and staff provide ongoing consulting.

Natalie says her group has been sharing skills with a number of businesses, including growers, processors, shippers and manufacturers, that have been working towards evaluating the “footprint” of their operations and pursuing opportunities for improvement. She says, “The organic trade’s orientation and history uniquely positions us to be early adopters in developing and modeling the innovative practices that can move us closer to our ideals.”

Down in Noti, Oregon, WinterGreen Farm underwent the process of self-evaluation, and founding member Jack Gray concluded that, “One of our most dramatic findings was the amount of gas and diesel used running around the farm between fields and barns. In our crop rotation, we moved most of our CSA and Farmers market production back to our home place from a rented field two miles away. The energy saved was startling. This information pointed out just how significant a cost internal transportation is for us.”

Up in the Puget Sound area, Seattle based PCC Markets have taken on multiple initiatives to lighten their “footprint,” including the ban of single-use plastic shopping bags, a heavy focus on green construction, introducing double-sided transaction receipts, replacing paper shelf tags with electronic point-of-purchase displays, and initiating company-wide recycling and composting procedures. All of which have contributed to significant waste reduction.

Diana Crane, Director of Sustainability at PCC Natural Markets states that, “Consumers today can’t help but be aware of – or at least question – the impact their buying decisions makes on their communities, the environment, their health and their financial stability.”

PCC received the 2009 Green Washington Award, the 2009 Best Workplace Recycling and Waste Reduction and first-ever Sustainability Excellence Award, in recognition of their work.

Out in the heartland, the HQ of Or-



Photo courtesy of PCC Natural Markets

Redmond Dairy Cooler at PCC Market shows the installation of LED (light emitting diode) lights. They require about one-fourth of the electricity of fluorescent lights, produce less heat than incandescent bulbs, and last far longer.

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ganic Valley Coop improved their already substantial efforts at being even more green and environmentally responsible.

Jennifer Harrison, Organic Valley's Sustainability Program Manager at Organic Valley Coop enthuses that, "Committing to the FTSLA has given us the opportunity to share our process and to learn from others in the industry. The metrics and reporting formats developed by the FTSLA has helped us to streamline the reporting and to measure ourselves against what others in the organic industry are doing in a pre-competitive environment."

She notes that Organic Valley has been working to engage their entire supply chain "from our farmers, to our processors, our packaging and transportation/freight providers on measuring their footprints."

Natalie White says, "We seek to engage companies who feel a sense of urgency about the state of the planet and society, and that believe their businesses should have a truly balanced triple bottom line. We focus on achieving tangible progress towards sustainability by working with 'early adopters' who are willing to innovate and try new approaches. We also aim to create a community of practice where members will share 'what works' and undertake joint projects, accelerating progress towards our collective vision and enhancing business relationships."

Jennifer Harrison is pragmatic about the work they are doing. "These days it is all about measuring. If you aren't measuring, you aren't proving the impact your sustainability initiatives are having on the environment, economy or your community. Statements without proof are greenwashing."

*For more information about the work of FTSLA, including their Declaration of Sustainability, and educational materials see [www.ftsla.org](http://www.ftsla.org).*

*For information about Organic Valley Coop, or to see their impact calculator visit [www.organicvalley.coop](http://www.organicvalley.coop).*

*PCC markets are all over the Puget Sound area, and viewable online at [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com).*

*By Will Newman II*

I've been thinking about two issues that plague most farmers:

- 1. What is the purpose of the business – making profits or providing quality products?**
- 2. How big is enough?**

As a farmer I have faced them.

As a business consultant, a fair number of my clients have been small- to medium-size farms, and they have all faced these same issues.

Farms follow a common pattern in their development. The first few years are taken up with developing growing, harvesting, and marketing practices, and trying to make ends meet.

Once the farm is operating successfully, usually after three to five years, the grower faces these questions.

The answers will determine the future success of the farm, because they will guide every business decision that follows.

Putting returns first, in my experience, invariably leads to failure, as product quality and service steadily deteriorate in the quest to increase profits.

Deciding to focus on improving product and service, along with charging adequately is an approach that leads to lasting success.

The question of "right-sizing" is particularly difficult for growers. Agriculture is a part of the natural world, not the industrial world, while our economic system is based on industrial principles. Because of this embedded industrial economic worldview, agricultural "experts" always push for bigger, e.g. Agricultural Commissioner Earl Butz's often quoted "Get bigger or get out!" University researchers, funded primarily by industrial agriculture, support this approach. Lenders and suppliers also favor larger operations over smaller.

All of this flies in the face of measurable realities. Generally small farms are better farms. They are more productive per square foot and less polluting. They yield more calories of food energy per calorie of input, and are more profitable. And most ignored by industrial agriculture: food from small farms is generally more nutritious than food from

industrial operations. In addition, small farms strengthen and add resilience to local economies.

There lies the dilemma: virtually all structural, economic, and academic support is for larger, industrial approaches to production and distribution, while virtually all approaches that lead to quality food are small, decentralized and based on natural cycles.

Natural and organic food businesses have become a very successful part of the food system precisely because they have favored quality over profits. This focus on quality has generally meant keeping operations smaller and more tuned to local markets than the bulk of the food industry.

This success has been a threat to industrial agriculture. The reason successful natural and organic food businesses are called "niche markets" is to diminish their importance and to obscure the fact that they are successful precisely because they address the production and distribution of quality food outside the industrial business model. When the organic portion of the market became too large to ignore, organics was co-opted by industrial agriculture, and it has been a constant fight to maintain standards ever since.

We continue to hear, as we have for decades, that small farms are not viable. The reality is that they have been, they are, and they will continue to be. We continue to hear that we must get bigger or get out. We do not. Throughout the world it is small, organic, local farms that produce the best food available, and at reasonable prices.

The past success of the organic and natural food movement is founded on an understanding that food is not an industrial product, and cannot be produced or distributed as if it were. Our continued success will be based on maintaining the integrity of that vision.

And we will be helping to build a sound, sustainable economy in the process.

*Will Newman is a long-time organic farmer at Natural Harvest Farm near Canby, Ore., and a co-founder of the Oregon Sustainable Agricultural Land Trust.*