

Conservation Agriculture Systems Alliance

Conference Call

Monday, Dec 14 at 11 a.m. (eastern)

Participants:

Brian Lindley, No-Till on the Plains

Patt Evans, Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association

Larry Wright, SPARC

Francisco Arriaga, ARS lab in Auburn

Randall Reeder, Ohio No-Till Council

Jerry LeMunyon, NRCS

Bill Kuenstler, NRCS

Cissy Bowman, Indiana Certified Organic

Blair McClinton, Sashkatchwan Soil Conservation Association

Joel Myers, PANTA

Karen Scanlon, CTIC

AGENDA

Cissy Bowman – 1973 started growing organic food; accredited to national organic program; extends certification internationally, accepted by UK.

Organic movement was consumer and farmer movement; beign put on labels, needed consistent meaning; part of farm bill (to be implemented before Oct 1, 1993) -- not until 2001 that program was actually created, implemented 2002. Remember dealing with government time frame. Took years to write and get rule on legislation. Still not complete, not completely understandable. When first written, didn't have GMOs and nanotechnology. After years at this an

Caution about creating a law to create a program – esp if want to move quickly. Regulations change over time and lots of opinions offered.

Animal welfare, fair trade and others have established certification programs. Some go for ISO 65.

There is a lot of room at this time for new labels for good QA protocols.

Consider marketability of the label. Organic already had that.

Market that created the market.

LW: is it going to be sustainable for us to have a label? How much revenue is brought in for clients?

CB: people say about double. Look at commodity price for soybeans, price is about double. Not same for all commodities. Dairy was up high, no low. In general, 20% to double prices, but it depends. Have not had problem maintaining income as a certifier. Don't just do raw commodities, but also process products.

LW: struggle with what market can we create to see a profit. How do you make money?

CB: totally fee based. Some certification agencies charge user fees (percentage of gross sales), but we don't. if not-for-profit, can get grants, but that can be iffy at best.

CB: certify crops, livestock, wild crops and handling. Other areas of certification like personal care, bee products, aquaculture and mushrooms (not clearly defined under standards in place now)

KS: most people wouldn't do certification/standard again

CB: did unprecedented job of public comment, but main thing is time frame. Takes too long.

Through government, advisory board appointed, appropriation, etc. Organic started with private

agencies and some state agencies, developed movement and marketing. If start from scratch, can't imagine how long it would take. Also subject to administrative changes, as well.

Other road is private label/private certification. Get some type of accreditation. ISO 65 (international organization for standardization) provide assurance that something has been done to according a set of protocols and procedures that indicate you are doing what you say you are. Involves inspection (ISO 61). Not very long language. Matter of describing how you go about it. Whether private or government, must understand what this means. Another ISO involves auditing.

FA: who does the inspections?

CB: ICO is a decision making body. Inspections done by contractor (other than decision maker). Hired to go to facility and report what is seen compared to regulation. Don't make recommendations or decisions. Certification office reviews report and makes decision. QA protocol – expertise in staff, transparent in decision making, free of conflict. Inspections required annually.

RR: is definition of organic dairy still being debated or recently decided? If we did certified no-till, there will be all kinds of debate.

CB: there is somewhat of a definition. Some confusion about language. Have to provide access to pasture – what does that mean? In government regulations or any standard, have to very seriously consider definitions. Any standard has to be doable, enforceable and understandable. Office of General Counsel and OMB may not give you what you thought you were going to get.

Personal perspective, own my agency, no board of directors – have to be able to move with the program and be flexible enough to change when necessary. Strongly suggest a private label and non-clumsy structure.

BM: going to be issues with definitions of no-till, an obvious one is at what level of disturbance qualify as no-till, perhaps rotational questions. Also have issues with stackability of different certifications – no-till, fallow reduction, cover crop inclusion, forage establishment. Can get complicated at farm level.

CB: seen animal welfare standards at tiered system, applied successfully under ISO 65. Animal welfare certification (private) seems to be successful and moving quite well. Organics is systems-based, processed-based system. Certifying an operation. So, consider is it product-based or processed-based certification.

Critical questions to ask: what is your time frame? Do you want a government regulated certification?

Closer you can come to any government definition, better you'll be able to work with those agencies.

BL: Program is ISO 9000 out of South America...needs translated and figure how to implement

CB: accreditations are expensive. Financial implications are equally complicated and interesting.

Thanks to Cissy.

Discussion:

RR: early reaction is that we would get into nearly impossible situation. Tying govt commodity payments to conservation tillage – those that are tilling get definition so broad so that anyone fits. Trying to get no-till elite, will get arguments to broaden it and water it down.

LW: accumulating information on marketability of ecosystem services/environmental benefits; based on this, do see demand and opportunity because consumers willing to pay for those benefits; this may be better way to approach this. Consumers maintain control of dollar up to point of purchase. Taxpayers lose control once send in dollars.

Trying to develop third-party certification. Do have quality product with no-till wheat, documenting product quality, soil quality, etc. Building own flour mill to mill and package on own. Creating new process and market. Done pilot projects to test product. Stillwater Public Schools used flour liked it and support greater development.

Did not go through Food Alliance certification. Second largest behind organic. Would be good certifier. Price may be reasonable. Don't have FA inspector in Oklahoma; travel costs make it prohibitive.

RR: how does a producer qualify? Continuous no-till

LW: yes, must be continuous no-till and using good rotations that improve soil quality. If tillage reintroduced, lose environmental benefits.

RR: in Midwest, farmers like to till before corn.

FA: in southeast, farmers do occasional tillage to break up naturally occurring compaction layers. Soils in AL, GA in cotton production for 100+ years, little residue.

LW: use deep rooted crops in rotations do break up lower compacted layers

FA: use winter cover crops – cereal rye – and that helps to eliminate non-inversion tillage in some soils. Another challenge is peanut crops – must be dug out to harvest.

JM: is it still considered no-till?

FA: no. we call it non-inversion tillage. Including strip till or zone till.

BL: NTOP is looking at certification from South America. Definitions are key and critical first step.

JM: once go away from strict no-till, open door for discussions and changes and exceptions.

BK: NRCS STIR rating would be better measure than soil conditioning index, as a starting point anyway. STIR value looks at volume of soil disturbed. SCI is more nebulous. We want to minimize soil disturbance.

JM: that would be more equal north to south. SCI changes as we go south. If kept it strict enough, STIR may be possibility.

JL: conservation ag is not just presence or absence of tillage. It's got to be rotation, cover crop, nutrient and pest management. Has to be full system.

JL: if we embark on certification path, must include cover crops, organic matter, moisture conservation. Cissy was warning us about others trying to drag us into many different directions.

LW: would like to see certification to develop market. Consumers are the ones willing to pay.

JL: regional approach to certification?

LW: see advantages to national scale for marketability. Consensus on how to qualify will be more difficult.

RR: regional or local vs national is good comment. People more interested in buying local today, too, not necessarily organic. That may help solve issue of defining no-till. Define by region (OK have definition, PNW have definition, etc.).

JL: what if there was so many certification items that had to be assessed, so can slip in single areas, but overall score is what matters. Would that work?

LW: all the ecosystem services are primary points to market

BM: CCX already set certain benchmark for no-till certification, whether you like it or not. They have taken regional differences into account. We should remember that some things already exist and have been recognized. Is this something we can build on? Should we look at specific crops? Differences by region in how to approach different systems.

LW: get a copy of ISO 9000

BL: go to AAPRESID to download

Francisco and Jerry can help to translate

JL: look at five tenants of CA. develop each into standard/criteria.

Next call: January 5, 2010

Member Updates

No-till On the Plains: preparing for Dec 17 meeting with Jill Clapperton, value of cover crops and how it translates through soil and crop; on-farm research; research farms managed by Jill and Dwayne Beck; may put agronomist on staff

SSCA: finished crop advisers workshop by webinar, will be available online soon (measuring carbon stock changes, long-term crop residue removal on soil quality changes); annual conference in Feb; scaling back operations (all staff will be part-time as of March 1)

PNDSA: Annual conference is Jan 20-21 in Kennewick, Wash., good support from sponsorship; bringing two authors to discuss books: David Montgomery (Dirt: Erosion of Civilization), Thomas Hagar (Alchemy of Air)

PANTA: Feb. 16-17 meeting for crop professionals

Ohio No-Till Council: Just had annual no-till meeting last week, 196 attendees; cover crop focus;
CT Conference Feb 25-26, 2010

SPARC: Third statewide no-till conference on Feb. 8-9

ARS: GA Tillage Alliance will have tillage school in February, in collaboration with UGA, ARS
and NRCS

NRCS: Jerry going to Juan Manuel

CTIC: inquiries from NoTill Club from Ukraine and European Conservation Agriculture
Federation (ECAAF) have reached out to CASA for international interaction. Framework for CIG
proposal?

BM: investigate using skype

Next steps:

KAS email Cissy for more information about animal welfare standard

Randall Reeder will try to learn more for next call

Brian email link to presentation on AAPRESID certification program