

# Issue Update

## ASA Makes Strides in Setting Sustainability Framework

| By Beverly Paul

**The Association fought for a mainstream standard to combat an unrealistic set of requirements that very few producers outside of organic production would qualify for.**

The American Soybean Association's (ASA) work on sustainability standards took another significant step forward earlier this year with the finalization of the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers' (ASABE) X-629 sustainable agriculture standard. The ASABE X-629 standard was influenced by the Soybean Sustainability Assurance Protocol (SSAP), developed by ASA, the United Soybean Board (USB) and the U.S. Soybean Export Council (USSEC), and functions as a more viable replacement for the Leonardo Institute's controversial 2015 LEO-4000 standard.

ASA was a part of the LEO-4000 standard in the early stages but departed following disagreements over the initiative's direction. What follows is a look at the sustainability work undertaken by ASA and the finalization of the X-629 standard.

The drive to create a sustainability standard for agriculture began in 2007, when ASA learned of an effort to set a national standard based on the idea that only organic production is sustainable. The standard was being prepared for submission to the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the internationally-recognized coordinator of the United States' voluntary consensus standards system.

ASA leaders quickly realized the threat it posed to mainstream production agriculture. With the concept of sustainability growing in importance

for consumers, a national standard that defined sustainability as only organic and approved by an internationally-recognized body jeopardized commercial soybean production.

The draft standard was the work of Scientific Certification Systems, a company that sells third-party environmental and sustainability certification and sponsored by the Leonardo Academy, a nonprofit organization that develops sustainability standards. SCS-001 came to be known as LEO-4000 in 2010. If approved by ANSI, the LEO-4000 standard would define only organic and non-biotech food, feed and fuel as sustainable and would require elaborate certification processes for farmers.

In April 2008, ASA registered a long list of concerns with ANSI, calling the draft standard fundamentally flawed, and stating, "...the draft standard arbitrarily specifies that only organic and non-biotech production can qualify as 'sustainable' production. Such specification is not based on objective, scientific performance measures, but rather wholly subjective ideology. The draft standard arbitrarily excludes 99.8 percent of U.S. soybean production from the definition of 'sustainable' soy production."

At the same time, ASA joined with an industry-wide coalition to create the Sustainable Agriculture Standard Task Force (SASTF). ASA, the



American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) were founding members of the coalition, which eventually grew to include more than 50 groups representing production agriculture.

Together, the SASTF began its work to ensure that LEO-4000 would not become the recognized benchmark to define which soybean farms would be labeled sustainable. ASA's goal, through SASTF, was to confine the draft standard to the organic niche in which it belonged.

ASA Vice President Ron Moore was an active member of SASTF, and volunteered to serve on a subcommittee for the ANSI process.

"The LEO-4000 standard was an unrealistic set of requirements that very few producers outside of organic production would ever qualify for, and if they did the cost would be extremely

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high,” Moore said. “Furthermore, mainstream agriculture was not represented particularly well on the committee with only corn, soybeans, cotton and Farm Bureau in attendance. The rest of the attendees were from environmental, social justice, organic, and certification organizations.”

Moore and other SASTF representatives worked to ground impractical ideas about production agriculture, fighting off proposals that would exclude farms using most inputs like fertilizer, chemicals or biotechnology.

“There were people on the committee who did not understand that the standard they were promoting would exclude over 200 million acres of corn, soybean, cotton, and wheat,” Moore said.

In all, 10 members of SASTF, including Moore, were selected as voting members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Standards Committee. But after nearly two years it became clear that the process was biased against a balanced analysis of modern agriculture. The SASTF members resigned as a group in 2010.

Recognizing that sustainability issues were here to stay, SASTF members began a separate, grower-driven process called the National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture (NISA), housed at the University of Wisconsin. Ultimately, together with USB and USSEC, ASA recognized the need for a unique soy standard and developed the SSAP, which led to the ASABE X-629 standard.

Still, the ANSI process wore on, and ASA continued to raise objections. In 2014, ASA again wrote to ANSI to urge rejection of LEO-4000, noting the unrealistic nature of the standard, its lack of understanding of modern agriculture practices, and the lopsided weight it assigned to environmental sustainability as compared to economic and social sustainability.

ANSI ultimately approved the LEO-4000 in November 2015, eight years after work began. While the broad-based SASTF coalition preferred for it to be rejected, the

process led to an alternate and credible parallel standard submitted through ASABE.

The ASABE X-629 standard provides a framework for continuous improvement and supports the SSAP by ensuring national standards do not discriminate against modern agricultural practices such as fertilizer, pesticides and biotechnology.

As a direct result of the SASTF’s work, the LEO-4000 standard will not be the only one purporting to represent U.S. agricultural sustainability. LEO-4000 will function only as the organic and non-GMO standard, provided that community accepts it.



Although the SASTF coalition no longer meets, sustainability remains a top priority for ASA. Additionally, given the high-profile nature of sustainability as a consumer buzzword, poorly thought-out initiatives are always around the corner. The SASTF was able to achieve its goal of confining the LEO-4000 standard to its niche in the organic community and paved the way for a legitimate sustainability framework through the ASABE that reflects all of U.S. agriculture. More importantly, the coalition set the soybean industry on its way to our own unique approach, demonstrating the sustainability of U.S. soybean production. These achievements are thanks to the time, energy, and knowledge of farmer leaders. And for the time being, their work is done. ▣

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