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Group Seeks to Measure Sustainability Performance for Specialty Crops

Entire Supply Chain Targeted for Measurement, Improvement

SAN FRANCISCO – December 18, 2008 – A group of more than 30 leading growers, suppliers, buyers, technical experts and environmental and public interest organizations today announced the formation of the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops. Through an inclusive effort, the group will develop and share a comprehensive system for measuring sustainable performance across the supply chain—at farms, processors, distributors, food service providers, and retailers. The project will address the unique needs of specialty crop stakeholders while demonstrably improving environmental and social impacts. “Specialty crops” are defined to include fruits, vegetables, nuts and horticulture.

Unlike other sustainability initiatives, the Stewardship Index will not seek to prescribe standards or define a specific level of performance as “sustainable.” Rather, it aims to provide a system for measuring stewardship performance by focusing on desired outcomes. The project seeks to reduce the potential for duplicative monitoring and reporting systems, while allowing operators to engage in the sustainability journey regardless of their current level of performance.

The project is currently seeking public comment on an initial list of issues it believes should be measured to assess sustainable performance. The proposed issues and a list of current participants may be found at the project’s web site at www.stewardshipindex.org. The project is encouraging broad participation from interested stakeholders across the specialty crops industry, including technical experts and public interest organizations.

“We’re finding that very diverse stakeholders want a workable system for measuring sustainable performance in this industry,” said Jonathan Kaplan of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a founding participant. “As businesses measure and improve, profits, people and the environment can all win.”

Other founding participants also emphasize the potential benefits of metrics that are both clearly defined and developed cooperatively.

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"A consensus approach to measuring sustainable performance will allow individuals to demonstrate their performance using common terms," noted Hank Giclas of Western Growers. "This approach will provide an opportunity to communicate the many practices employed by the industry to promote the 'people, planet and profit' pillars of sustainability and benchmark our efforts for continual improvement."

"As we learned from working to improve our industry's food safety, the absence of accepted, industry-wide standards will allow proliferating standards to add unnecessary costs to the system," added Tim York, president of Markon Cooperative. "And we need science-based data. It's to everyone's advantage to collaborate to develop metrics that are specific, measurable and verifiable."

About Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops

The Stewardship Index for Specialty Crops project is a multi-stakeholder initiative to develop a system for measuring sustainable performance throughout the specialty crop supply chain. The project will offer a suite of outcomes-based metrics to enable operators at any point along the supply chain to benchmark, compare, and communicate their performance. SISC does not seek to provide standards, but rather to provide a yard-stick for measuring sustainable outcomes. In the future, the project may also provide tools and resources to help specialty crop companies advance sustainability goals. Additional information is available on the Web at www.stewardshipindex.org.

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