

[The New York Time Green Inc.](#)

By [Jared Flesher](#)



Conventional farmers, organic farmers, giant agribusiness companies, environmentalists — all have varying views on what “sustainable agriculture” really means.

Perhaps not for long.

The [Leonardo Academy](#), an environmental think tank in Madison, Wis., is busy refereeing a debate over a new “[National Sustainable Agriculture Standard](#),” under the guidelines of the [American National Standards Institute](#).

One outcome of this effort could be a new “sustainable agriculture” label stamped on food — similar to the way some food is now marketed as organic. It could also create a system that rewards farmers for doing things like reducing the amount of nitrogen fertilizer they use.

In late May, members of the 58-member standards committee met in St. Charles, Ill., to make the first decisions about the scope of the voluntary standards they hope to create. The committee includes a variety of stakeholders like the [National Corn Growers Association](#), [General Mills](#), the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), and [American Farmland Trust](#).

One early point of contention has been genetically modified crops.

A preliminary “draft standard” from 2007 used organic agriculture as a starting point for sustainability, and it prohibited crops that had been genetically modified.

But groups like the American Farm Bureau Federation and the United States Department of Agriculture balked at the draft, which was ultimately scrapped. The new goal is to find a standard that makes room for “any technology that increases agricultural sustainability,” according to a [statement](#) from the Leonardo Academy earlier this month.

“Organic is basically four percent of the domestic market,” said Russell Williams, director of regulatory relations for the [American Farm Bureau](#), in an interview. “So if you’re going to talk about ‘sustainable organic agriculture,’ that’s fine. But if you’re going for ‘sustainable agriculture,’ then the standard needs to be much more broad.”

Many organic advocates don’t agree — though they believe developing sustainability standards for use by all farmers could be valuable to their cause.

“I’m of the opinion that it’s going to be difficult to get the average farmer in this country to move in one big step from where they are to a certified organic operation,” said Jeff Moyer, farm director at the Rodale Institute, which promotes organic agriculture. “But if we had a set of standards like a sustainability standard that would enable farmers to be rewarded for moving in the right direction, then I’m inclined to think that’s very positive.”

Among the more general points on which the committee has agreed so far: Any initial standard should cover only crop production (with livestock to come later), and it should only apply to practices on the farm, rather than the entire supply chain. The parties also agreed that the new standard should be performance-based, meaning that all farmers would be rewarded for improving sustainability practices, rather than just those who follow specific practices.

A final standard, if it makes it through the process with enough agreement from all parties, is expected to be completed by 2012.

<http://greeninc.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/defining-sustainable-agriculture/?emc=eta1>