

Field Notes:

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Sustainability is not a dirty word.

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Not very long after coming to work with the Extension Service I met one of the most colorful people of my entire career. He was not a native to the area, but had become one of the most successful farmers and an example to his neighbors on many aspects of cotton and livestock production. He and I became close friends during those first years and I guess we had more than a few discussions that often ended in a grin on his face because he had won.

I can think of several other exceptional farmers that have contributed to the general body of knowledge among their peers through the years, but only a few have been leaders. These are the exception, and are the product of their own diligence in learning the basics of land and soil management which are the ultimate keys to success in any kind of agriculture from the smallest garden to the largest plantation.

We have evolved you might say within the last two to four decades from an assumption that the land is a boundless resource to something different in which we are at least beginning to recognize that the land must be nurtured and conserved in order for those who follow us to be able to live and produce the necessities of life. When you think about it this is an enormous change that has actually taken place in a relatively short time.

This process of change has been difficult at times. Not only has it been a challenge for farmers but it has also for those in the regulatory agencies who have been tasked with making it happen. From the beginning there have been misunderstandings and miscommunications, difficult-to-understand regulations, and wild assumptions that the regulatory side or the production side of the equation could not or would not come to terms with. At times it seemed as if these salaried people and the farmers were never going to come to a point of reconciliation, but gradually that seems to be happening.

In those earlier times the word “sustainability” was thrown around a lot. For farmers, sustainable meant that the farm was profitable and would be able to stay in business. For those in the regulatory agencies the same word had a different meaning that very often clashed with the methods and opinions of farmers. The fact is that both were correct to a degree, however the regulatory people sometimes used their power in negative ways instead of the positive which any leader of people will know is correct.

Fortunately there have been those on both sides of the issue who have come to recognize the importance of improving rather than using the land. The practices of crop rotation, reduction of tillage, cover crops, the application of organic products like animal manure and poultry litter have been recognized as ways to improve not only the land but at the same time profitability.

That farmer I mentioned in the beginning once told me that he did not want to hear me say the word “sustainable” because it had been used as a weapon to prevent him from doing many of the things he knew his farm needed. In a broader sense he was right since the farmer is the ultimate keeper of the land and no one else has a stronger desire to do what is right for it.

The numbers of farmers is still dropping today in America, with only around one percent of the population directly involved with production agriculture. This seems to be stabilizing to some degree, and it will fluctuate with time. However, the one thing that seems to have emerged from the years of debate is that sustainability is a necessity, not only for farmers, but for everyone. In fact it is no longer a dirty word.

Thanks for your time.