

Summary

IFPS Sustainability Symposium

Held November 10, 2022



Members



Associate Members



Introduction

This Report summarises and analyses the proceedings and outcomes of the online Sustainability Symposium held by the International Federation for Produce Standards (IFPS) on 10 November 2022. Over 250 participants from 22 countries in North America, the European Union, Africa, Asia, South America and Oceania provided their input for this document. The Symposium began a global produce conversation towards harmonization in sustainability; the report can help inform regional discussions including potential topics/questions for consideration. The outcome of the Symposium is meant to begin efforts rather than define precise actions.

Background

IFPS

IFPS is the voice of fresh produce industry associations from Canada, the USA, Chile, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. As a coalition of equal partners, and first incorporated body made up of national industry organizations, IFPS provides a comprehensive forum to address issues in the fresh fruit and vegetable sector which require international harmonization or standardization. Our primary areas of interest are related to the structure, management, and the implications of produce identification standards, food safety standards, and data management standards, on the global fresh produce trade.

Over the last few years, the IFPS Board has increasingly become concerned about the impact of the wide variety of sustainability-related initiatives, legislation, regulations, and retailer-initiated requirements on global fresh produce value chains. The disparate drivers of sustainability, such as the EU Green deal, consumers putting on pressure in different ways around the globe, and apparent misalignment in the buying community, can be very confusing.

In addition, after the 2021 UN Global Food Systems Summit, the IFPS Board came to the conclusion that there was a need for specific work from a fresh produce perspective. Efforts are needed to ensure that sustainability standards, developed at different points in the produce value chain, are not in contradiction with each other; are not creating unintended roadblocks to domestic and international trade; and are implemented and managed in the most cost-effective way to ensure that value chain participants from growers to retailers are able to effectively adopt and integrate sustainability standards into their businesses.

Through this Symposium, IFPS sought to address the current landscape in the global produce industry, recognizing that achieving sustainability goals will require alignment between stakeholders and a harmonized approach to sustainability.

The objective was to reach a common understanding of what sustainability actually means within the global fresh produce industry, and where our emphasis as an industry, going forward, should be placed. It is time for us to make sure that we are heard better in the sustainability space, and that has to start by developing a common position.

In order for the global food system to feed the future population in a sustainable and healthy way, changes are needed all along the entire supply chain. The global fresh produce industry has a key role to play in the adoption of healthy diets produced by sustainable food systems, which will help address climate change, and biodiversity loss, as well as food security.

Production of fresh fruits and vegetables around the globe is increasingly challenging as growers are regularly faced with extreme weather events, concerns regarding soil health, biodiversity loss and plastic packaging, among others. Socially, the agricultural workforce is also under pressure.

The Challenge

The urgency to commit to the UN SDGs and act on these commitments is growing as we collectively approach growing numbers of ecological tipping points and witness greater social inequity across the globe. Consequently, there is increasingly pressing demand for some form of sustainability-related accountability, leading to a growing number of standards aiming at certifying sustainability claims, whether practice- or outcomes-based.

However, this demand comes from stakeholders that have their own sustainability reporting requirements. Standards are often designed to address specific concerns, resulting in a landscape of partial and partly-overlapping frameworks. This leads to organizations having to comply with multiple standards to substantiate the very same practices or outcomes, multiplying costs without much gain in terms of value-add.

Meanwhile, the scope and meaning of sustainability is ever-changing, driven by the progress of scientific knowledge, innovation and shifting social norms and values.

Standards will therefore evolve, and may continue to multiply, in conjunction with a growing need for harmonization to improve efficiencies throughout the value chain.

The symposium

Plenary sessions and panel discussions were followed by break-out sessions with all the participants, with the following answers to pre-established questions:

Group Responses

Q1. How do fresh produce stakeholders define sustainability with respect to the fresh produce industry?

- The need to provide a high-level definition, so that it can be customisable.
- The need for any definition to be simple and recognisable.
- Using simple and easy-to-follow language to define sustainability, with any definition needing to allow for a range of farm sizes.
- Sustainability should be defined through identifying its “enemy” i.e., various types and locations of waste in the supply chain.
- Ratios of desired & non-desired inputs and outputs as a measure of sustainability.

Q2. Should the industry adopt definitions made by existing frameworks and standards? Which one(s)?

- At the simplest level, the Triple P Model (People, Planet, Profit) was offered, as it can be customisable.
- The challenges between a high-level general approach, and the specific relevancies to various parts of the supply chain was also discussed.
- Any search for a suitable existing sustainability framework to adopt was expected to cover both international & local realities, not leave any gaps, and use definitions that advance the overall goal of reducing negative impacts on industry within the Triple P.
- Unless a whole-of-supply-chain-approach is adopted, too much time is wasted on defending the positions of the respective building blocks that build the supply chain.

Q3. Should the industry focus on specific issues or priorities (e.g., high risks, easy wins)? Which one(s)?

- The pursuit of “low-hanging fruit” or easy wins was recommended as a preferred approach to tackling any outcome-oriented industry issue.
- Industry should adopt a framework that is already recognised.
- Waste reduction goes immediately to the bottom line, ergo being an easy win.
- Industry priorities
 - Food Waste
 - Climate change
 - Packaging

- Cold-chain operations
- Traceability/food recalls
- Water management
- The avoidance of silo thinking
- Whole-of-supply-chain (including indirect suppliers') cooperation.
- Priorities are likely to emerge regardless of any suggested ranking.

Q4. Is there a particular issue to which the fresh produce industry is best positioned to contribute (e.g., climate, water, biodiversity)?

- Carbon reduction
- Pest management
- Disease management
- Nutrient management
- Communication & marketing strategies
- New technology such as artificial intelligence
- Air freight
- Cold chain usage
- Consumer education
- Improved management of supply chain linkages.
- Climate change and, carbon sequestration
- Soil management
- Controlled Environment agriculture

Q5. To what extent does the lack of harmonized standards preclude action towards sustainability within the industry?

- Not an issue at all, at the high level.
- There were challenges in aligning efforts, due to different sets of requirements.
- Lack of harmonisation is leading to insurmountable issues in the audit space, and that the lack of mutual recognition between standards was extremely cumbersome.
 - Harmonising standards would make compliance easier and reduce costs.
 - Standards cannot just be audit focused but should aim to help measure a businesses sustainability goal, and the progress in meeting these. This should be scalable to meet a variety of supply chain needs.
 - A sustainability system needs to be objective in its measurements.
 - A sustainability standards system cannot focus on one step of the supply chain but needs to be fit for purpose from the grower to the consumer.

Q6. What standards already exist that provide the most value to industry?

- Standards bodies that provided some value to the industry:
 - ISO
 - Global Reporting Initiative
 - Fairtrade
 - GFSI
 - SISC
 - Global Farm Metric
 - Global GAP
 - SEDEX
 - Smeta
 - Rainforest Alliance
 - Ethical Trade Charter
 - IFRS-S
- The above standards provide value. All are limited in scope and applicability.
- A global harmonised sustainability framework would provide even more value to the industry, beyond the value of current systems.

Q7. If new or harmonized standards were to be developed, what particular gap(s) should they address?

- A need to scale from individuals to global corporations.
- A scope that needs to cover the entire supply chain from production to the consumer.
- The ability to cover not just field-grown, but controlled environment production, such as greenhouses, mushrooms, and vertical farming.
- A need to be forward/future facing, to meet the needs of tomorrow.
- Reducing costs by reducing work required to comply.
- Practical implementation at all sizes.

Q8. From which standpoint(s) should industry efforts address sustainability (e.g., from a commodity, business, or value chain perspective; globally or regionally)?

- The industry efforts should be clear, and address all levels (commodity, business, value chain) in some manner, with a focus on strategic guidance.
- The industry should focus on:
 - Factors of sustainability
 - Global vs local perspectives
 - Economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability
 - Terms and definitions of concepts in sustainability (such as compostable)
 - Benchmarks and benchmarking bodies.
 - Helping industry work with all the current sustainability benchmarks and audit bodies to align all efforts into a simpler system that reduces costs and effort required to comply.
- Any industry response needed to be a whole-of-industry response, based not just on a supply chain, but the value chain.

Q9. To what extent is sustainability seen as a pre-competitive issue for industry stakeholders? What aspect(s) should be common to the industry vs. established by individual organizations?

- Sustainability is not a pre-competitive issue, but is either a competitive marketing/sales advantage, or not considered at all.
- Sustainability concepts are being involved in marketing with claims which may not be verifiable.
- Greenwashing was an issue, including aspects such as marketing products as achieving sustainability goals, based on supplier sustainability efforts, but without any effort to improve from the company marketing their product.
- There should be a common industry baseline for sustainability to become a pre-competitive issue:
 - Economic sustainability of the fresh produce industry.
 - Packaging and delivery mechanisms that do not negatively impact sustainability, i.e., increased packaging.
 - Industry wide standardised definitions and measurements.
- A level playing field, where possible.

Q10. If used, how effective are sustainability measurement tools within your business and do they go far enough? (e.g. Carbon calculators / whole farm metric calculators)

- Current sustainability measurement tools available across the industry are limited in effectiveness, due to several factors.
- The tools are limited by factors including, but not limited to:
 - Narrow scopes of data collection and analysis.
 - Being unable to accurately compare data from different tools.
 - Gaps in tool availability.
 - The data being generated by some tools having little to no use, or not measuring sustainability efforts in a manner that is effective.
 - The ability to cherry-pick tools and measurements to appear more sustainable than is the case.

A standardised system was needed in order to be able to improve upon several of these issues, as many of the current problems relate to the lack of a single trusted standard, that can be used to verify claims.

Q11. Aside from standard setting, what other initiative(s) could the industry undertake to guide the sustainability agenda (e.g., mapping, coordinating, consensus building, aligning, advocating, collecting, aggregating, reporting)?

- Consumer and industry education on the sustainability standards and what they measure is needed: standards are not effective if they are not used, or people don't know what they mean.
- Assisting the industry in collaborating on sustainability and industry drivers is important, due to the complexity and scope of sustainability.
- The industry needs an advocacy body on long-term sustainability efforts.

Industry needs to take efforts to reduce indirect issues such as greenwashing.

Q12. If used, how effective are sustainability measurement tools within your business and do they go far enough? (e.g. Carbon calculators / whole farm metric calculators)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectiveness of the available tools revolved not around the tools, but around what data and measurements are required, as different customers, regulators, and auditors have different expectations. Gaps in measurement and scopes made a single standard a critical need. Tools that meet supply chain (i.e., customer/consumer) reporting needs and enable clarity are useful, but definitions can cause issues in measurement (e.g., what is local?).
Q13. What is the ideal model for addressing sustainability measurement and reporting and who determines it?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measuring the key indicators that consumers acknowledge (CO₂, plastics, organics, etc.). A system that is trusted. One that engages all levels of the value chain. A model that involves realistic expectations. A model based on the needs of the entire value chain, and with input from all parts of the value chain. A model that takes into account environmental and regional variances.
Q14. Through what channel(s) or forum(s) can the collective power of the industry be used to align the sustainability agenda for fresh produce?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IFPS needs to work with the global channels and opportunities provided via IFPS members in order to achieve the sustainability agenda. IFPS needed to work with regulators to avoid laws & regulations being developed without industry input. IFPS needs to assist in developing a coherent and realistic framework.
Q15. How should the IFPS expand its standards-related mandate into the sustainability area?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IFPS should act as an influencer in standards directions of individual existing standards owners. IFPS should be using its mandate to engage with all relevant standards bodies, to encourage & advance collaboration & alignment of standards into a more harmonised framework system.
Q16. What organization(s) or industry player(s) within or outside the fresh produce industry should IFPS engage with to achieve this?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect value chain participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shipping companies Global GAP Others. All stakeholders Should have to be engaged with.
Learnings for IFPS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some participants understood the questions better than others. There appears to be no consensus on whether a Triple P Model (people, planet, profit) should be applied by the industry, or whether a higher-level general approach, with a more specific produce industry focus criteria should be adopted. The benefits of a whole-of-supply-chain approach was well understood by this group. The number of existing sustainability standards is too substantial for IFPS to start working on developing yet another sustainability standard. Despite there being a plethora of standards already engaged on sustainability, the industry view appears to be that matters such as a whole-of-supply-chain approach, all production methodologies, and future facing factors, have yet to be sufficiently met by any of these standards. Even if it is unrealistic for IFPS to develop its own sustainability standards, the answers to Question 3 of this set of questions provides a starting point for assessing existing sustainability standards applicable to the fresh produce industry. Industry does not view sustainability as a pre-competitive issue, but if considered, it is seen as a competitive marketing position. Industry appears to view sustainability not as one homogenous mass, but as a concept that separates into strategic, tactical, and operational segments. Of those, the operational challenges (the here and now) are more important to most, compared to the tactical or strategic considerations. The lack of sufficient interoperability in terms of capturing, analysing, and presenting sustainability data in a common methodology, and moving it along the supply chain, appears to be a challenge like food safety related processes in this area.

- Alignment of sustainability standards requires an alignment of data scope and measurement methodologies, which currently differ between customers, regulators, and auditors, all of whom have different expectations.
- Industry participants appear to be seeking support from an industry advocacy body to achieve a harmonised standards approach that is practical and enduring.
- Group participants supported IFPS engagement in sustainability but took the differing positions of IFPS being an influencer of existing standards setters, or a direct driver towards harmonisation into one standard.
- Mixed views appear to exist on the number of sustainability stakeholder drivers in any given supply chain, versus the number of supply chain participants.
- The groups felt that too much emphasis is placed in terms of adherence to the specific physical locations, for example farms or packhouses, and not enough on other supply chain elements, for example transport activities.
- It appears that not enough of the audit focus is placed on auditing a supply chain's sustainability as a whole, as opposed to only focusing on the individual supply chain elements, which is the current practice