

Developing Worker Health Standards in Sustainable Agriculture

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Sustainable agriculture is a system in which all production resources—soil, water, wildlife and all others—are not “used up” to produce food. Applying the sustainability ethic to the people who work in agriculture means, among other things, that employers must protect their bodies from work-related injury and illness. While there is a certain amount of natural wear and tear on the human body from manual labor, good practices and ergonomically sound techniques can prevent chronic injuries as well as create a work environment that is as free as possible from the threat of acute injury. I must note that there is little difference between sustainable agriculture and “conventional” agriculture in the imperative or the need for creating a safe workplace. Employees in sustainable agriculture, just like their counterparts in “conventional” agriculture, still encounter exposure to hazards related to chemicals, musculo-skeletal stress and accidents, noise, machinery injuries, environmental conditions, and more. Hence, there is little difference in the process of developing safety standards for sustainable agriculture as opposed to those for conventional agriculture.

A key factor in worker health and safety in sustainable agriculture is the current status of practices in this sector of our industry. After many years of observing the development of the organic and sustainable farming industry in the US, it is obvious that in general, the organic and sustainable growers often do a worse job than the “conventional” growers due to casual employment culture in “alternative” agriculture. Many farms using sustainable or organic production techniques are small. They don’t have a safety manager or a human resources manager (of course neither do most “conventional” farms). But they do have highly involved and motivated owner/managers. What these owner/managers in the “sustainable” farming community need to do is to develop its “culture of safety.” They can do this by working to understand the existing government safety regulations and industry safety standards and then developing systems for applying these standards to the small farms in the “sustainable agriculture” sector.

It would be most effective for sustainable agriculture farmers to use a systematic approach to improving safety on their farms. One of the most effective and immediate means of improving safety is to establish written safety policies and rules and to then regularly communicate those policies and rules to employees, even if it is only one employee. Basic policies on machinery use and training, lifting, what to do in an emergency, chemical use and protection (many organic farms do use organic program certified chemicals that are hazardous to humans), ladder safety, etc. can become the basis for an employee training and orientation program.

The sustainable agriculture movement is a positive force in our industry. It can promote safe working conditions by developing scale appropriate safety systems. This information exists and help is currently available for smaller farmers using sustainable and organic production techniques to apply it to their farms. Basic principles of safety management apply no matter how small the farm or unconventional the production method.