

New food 'ruler' emerges in U.S.

Analysis

By HAROLD HARPSTER

MOST farmers have chosen their profession for its independence and opportunity to conduct their business as they see fit. However, that freedom is eroding with every passing year as animal care issues, environmental concerns and other governmental mandates influence how we can or cannot produce food.

Now it's becoming apparent that major food retailers may have even more to say than Uncle Sam. Walmart recently released the first part of a plan to develop a "worldwide sustainable product index."

The eventual goal is to provide information that allows consumers to choose more sustainable and environmentally friendly products. While it hasn't yet taken final form, it could be a numerical rating or color code attached to each product. Talk about influence and market clout!

First deadline is Oct. 1

Walmart's top-tier suppliers are required to answer a series of questions by Oct. 1. Questions cover four sustainable production areas: natural resources, energy and climate, people and community and material efficiency.

One can probably assume that "I choose not to answer these questions" isn't an option for remaining a top-tier supplier. Take a look at some of the questions (shortened for this article).

■ Have you established publicly available sustainability purchasing guidelines for your direct suppliers addressing environmental compliance, employment practices and product/ingredient safety?

■ Have you obtained third-party certifications for any of the products you sell to Walmart?

■ Have you measured your corporate greenhouse gas emissions?

■ Have you set publicly available greenhouse gas-reduction targets, and if so, what are those targets?

■ Do you know the location of 100% of the facilities producing your products?

■ Before beginning a business relationship with a manufacturing facility, do you evaluate the quality and capacity of production?

■ Do you have a process for managing social compliance at the manufacturing level?

■ Do you work with your supply base to resolve issues found, and document specific corrections and improvements?

■ If measured, please report the total yearly solid waste generated from the facilities that produce your product(s) for Walmart.

■ If measured, please report total annual water use from facilities producing your products for Walmart.

Now you have an idea of questions confronting frontline suppliers. These issues will filter directly back to the

Key Points

- Walmart is setting the agenda for agriculture and the environment.
- Top-tier suppliers must answer tough questions by Oct. 1.
- Major retailers will have more food-producing clout than Uncle Sam.

farm level.

Consider a video Walmart is now proudly promoting. It shows the production of a sour cream product that includes the dairy farm producing the milk, where manure is utilized in a methane digester.

What's disturbing is that the video narrative says, "Methane gas from cows

has a greater impact on global warming than all the cars on the earth."

Major retailers will have an increasing voice in how you go about your food producing business. There'll be little choice but to comply with their directives if you want to keep them as a customer!

Harpster is a Penn State animal scientist and part-time cow-calf producer.

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