

Sustainability: a slippery term



Sustaining Dakota

By JANET JACOBSON

WINTER is a time when we crunch numbers, evaluate what we did last growing season and plan for the next. We measure our successes and failures and analyze our profit and loss statements.

I also try to catch up on my reading. A brief article in a national farm publication recently caught my attention. The story reported that the National Association of Wheat Growers is launching initiatives to define and measure sustainability in agriculture. According to the news release, NAWG's focus is to make sure that the definitions and measurements used are achievable and meaningful for farmers and that economic sustainability is considered on equal footing with other aspects of sustainability.

It seems to me that if we define sustainability only in terms of what we can measure, ironically, we will narrow the term in ways that will not be sustainable. That may be especially true if we only measure what we think is achievable. We need to be careful that we are not defining sustainability simply to justify whatever practices we are presently using.

What's truly sustainable?

My husband and I have been farming organically for nearly 30 years. I would be hesitant to claim that organic agriculture, or any other current farming practice, is truly sustainable. Yes, organic farmers work hard to build the soil, to protect the water, to conserve resources and to preserve diversity.

On the other hand, organic farmers till the soil. We use fossil fuels to run our tractors. Our cows emit methane, and we ship organic commodities around the world.

We are facing climate changes, rising fuel prices and a growing and increasingly urban world population. What we think are sustainable practices today may not even come close to being sustainable tomorrow.

Certainly, short-term economics has to be included in our definition of what's sustainable.

However, sustainability must also include a way to measure the costs and benefits to those around us. If I can achieve an economic advantage by purchasing cheaper supplies in bulk from a hundred miles away, how do we measure the economic cost of that decision

Key Points

- Sustainable agriculture is more than what can be measured.
- Too many people use the term to justify what they are doing.
- Our efforts now will be judged by future generations.

on my community? What benefits are gained by producing and consuming food within a local area? Can all those

things that we call quality of life be measured and accounted for?

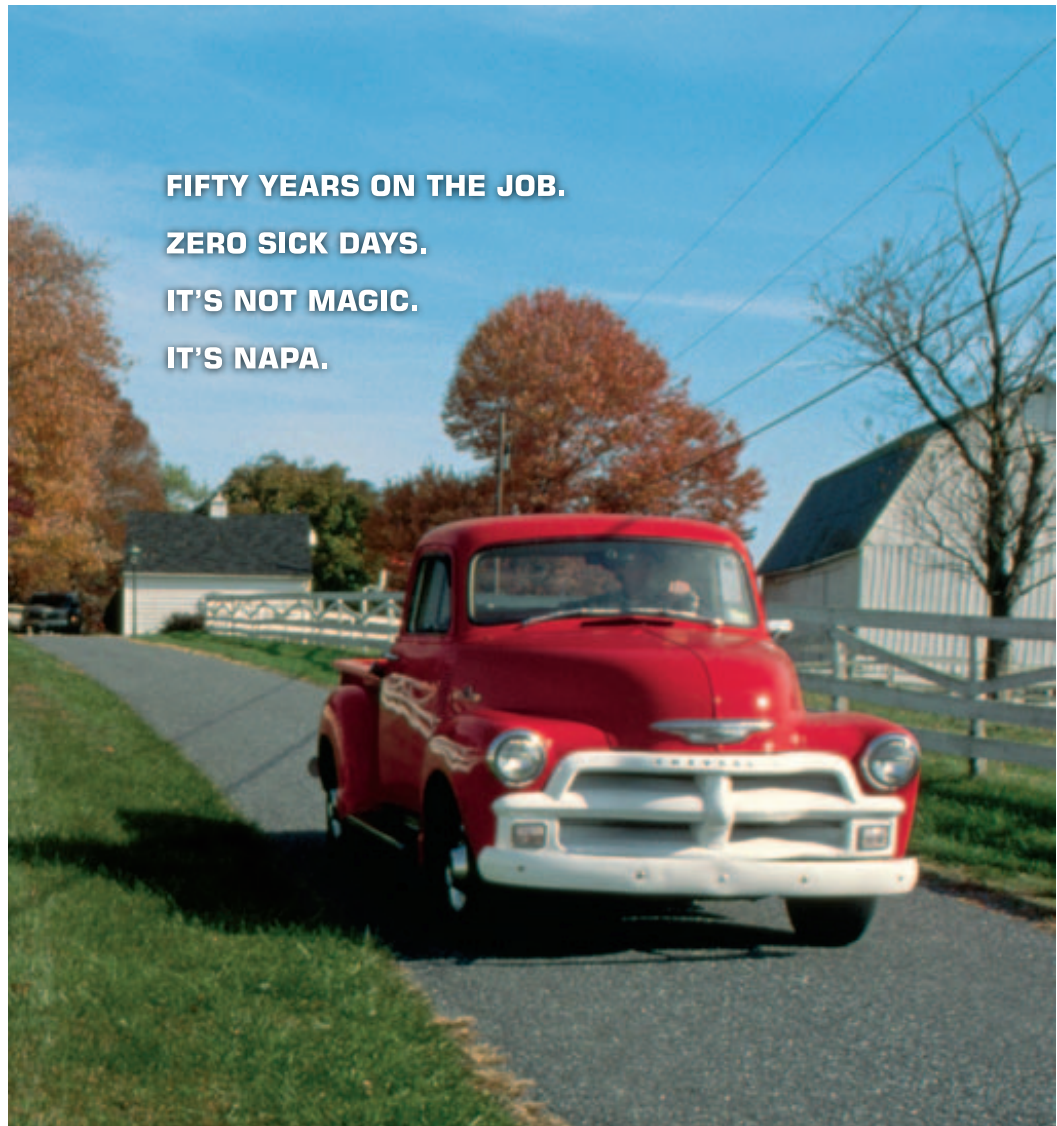
Perhaps sustainable agriculture would be better defined as a point toward which we are moving rather than something that we have already achieved. If we define sustainable agriculture as organic, or organic as sustainable, we put ourselves in a box. That box will keep us from learning from others and will keep others from learning from us.

Practitioners of organic agricul-

ture can learn from our friends who are working on no-till systems, from Integrated Pest Management, and from people who are practicing intensive grazing. Perhaps we can teach others about cover crops, building soil organic matter and reducing input costs.

Regardless of the definitions or rules we use, our attempts at sustainability will ultimately be judged not by us but by future generations.

Jacobson is an organic farmer, writer and wool processor from Wales, N.D.



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Praise for Drake, N.D.

What a great story! ("See lots of bull for sale in Drake," March 2008, Page 66.) What a great way to celebrate a community's heritage and promote the community! Best wishes to the folks at Drake, N.D.!

Darrell Nelson
via e-mail

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