Ag Reps Resign from ANSI Committee

Wednesday, 27 October 2010

Despite losing nearly 20 percent of its members last week, the National Sustainable Agriculture Standards Committee "remains on track" to develop a national standard of sustainability by fall 2012, said Michael Arny, president of Leonardo Academy, a non-profit think tank facilitating the project for the American National Standards Institute's consideration.

Eleven members, all from the mainstream agriculture sector, resigned from the 58-person committee Oct. 18, citing dissatisfaction over holding "a decidedly minor voice" in a process "dominated by environmental groups, certification consultants, agro-ecology and organic farming proponents," in a letter to Arny.

Arny said he respected their perspective, but disagreed with their assessment. "Leonardo Academy’s process of developing a sustainable standard allows for broad participation," he said. "For instance, there is no limitation to the number of members involved on subcommittees, which provide a lot of opportunities to voice concerns and ideas discussed amongst the standards committee."

The mainstream agriculture sector does not include floriculture's four representatives on the committee: Jim Barrett, Ph.D., an environmental horticulture professor at the University of Florida; Stan Pohmer, executive director of the Flower Promotion Organization; Will Healy of the Ball Horticultural Company and Ximena Franco-Villegas of Asocoflores.

Arny wants the 11 vacant seats filled before the committee's next meeting, Jan. 13-14 in San Francisco. In selecting members, Leonardo Academy will focus on fulfilling four categories — producers, users, environmentalists and general interest representatives — but identifying those in mainstream agriculture will be a priority, Arny said. "We look to provide as much diversity as we possibly can," he said. "Right now, we’re missing representation from that area."

Including mainstream agriculture in the committee's makeup is critical, Barrett said. "U.S. agriculture needs a National Sustainable Standard to reduce the complexity and inefficiencies of multiple standards," said Barrett, who also consults with growers on sustainability efforts. And without mainstream agriculture's input in the standard's development, Barrett fears the majority of the agricultural community would not use it, "and its value to the green industry would be greatly reduced" he said.

Although disappointed by the resignations, Arny said he looks forward to recruiting new members. "I appreciate the contribution these members have put in the past two years, but there are a lot of individuals and organizations interested in working on the project and I’m confident we’ll find good representatives to replace them," Arny said.

Formed in July 2008, the standards committee includes members from all areas of agriculture, including commodity producers, specialty crop producers, food distributors and retailers, environmental organizations, academics, regulators and certifiers.

To apply for the standards committee, click here for an application and submit it to Jennifer@leonardoacademy.org.

Those interested in following the process can access minutes from conference calls, position papers and working documents through a Wiki site the Leonardo Academy created.

For additional background on the Standard, see SAF’s sustainability page.

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