

Voluntary standards and certification: adapting to the future

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WWF's mission is about sustainable natural resource use and reducing pollution as well as its well-known role in conserving biodiversity.

Voluntary standards and certification have tremendous potential to present a clear call to action to consumers.

Environmental challenges

Agriculture's 4 major areas of global impact on the environment

- Water use – 70 % of freshwater withdrawals are for agriculture, by 2025 half the world's population will live in water stressed river basins.
- Water Soil and Air pollution – pollution by silt, nutrients and agro-chemicals impacts on freshwater and marine ecosystems all over the world. Agriculture is responsible for 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions.
- Conversion and simplification of habitats – Forest conversion accounts for the loss of a forest area the size of Greece or Nicaragua every year. Increased growing of commodity crops in tropical forests threatens the survival of species that are globally valued, such as the Sumatran Rhino.
- Soil degradation through soil erosion, salinisation, waterlogging etc. 46% of land in the world is reported to be moderately degraded and 16% strongly degraded.

Institutional challenges

Big buyers of agriculture products becoming fewer - only 300-500 major global buyers.

WTO mission creep – the WTO is concerning itself with areas of performance in the environment and agriculture that are outside its competence.

Disparity between what certification and voluntary schemes measure and what is claimed for them

Certified sector is tiny and highly fragmented – with too many ecolabels.

The mass of consumers is not yet interested in certified and eco-labelled products

- Eco-labelled products are perceived as too expensive
- producers do not receive enough of the premium that consumers pay

Consumers are highly concerned about residues and product safety

In the UK it is reported that consumers will act only on urgent problems where they can see clear connections between their actions and an environmental outcome.

Responses

To address the above challenges certification and voluntary labelling need to be mainstreamed; clearer linkages need to be made between consumers and solutions to environmental problems.

There are four important things that need to be done

- 1) Target the 300 – 500 major buyers. Concentration of buyers represents a real communications opportunity. It means that there are not that many people to reach.
- 2) Focus on the major impacts that growing each commodity has on the environment. We do not need long laundry lists of impacts that are not strategic. Select the 6-10 major global impacts and the 2-5 better management practices that will address these impacts
- 3) Produce measurable results that are linked to reducing the major environmental impacts that each commodity causes. Show quantitative progress against baseline data on water use, effluents . toxicity of all inputs, soil health and vitality, soil organic matter, impacts on biodiversity.
- 4) Certifiers should get together to compare standards in a transparent way and to support credible alternative to WTO regulation of eco-labels.