

The NISA Business Model

Discussion of NISA Path Forward

Denver, CO, March 16, 2012

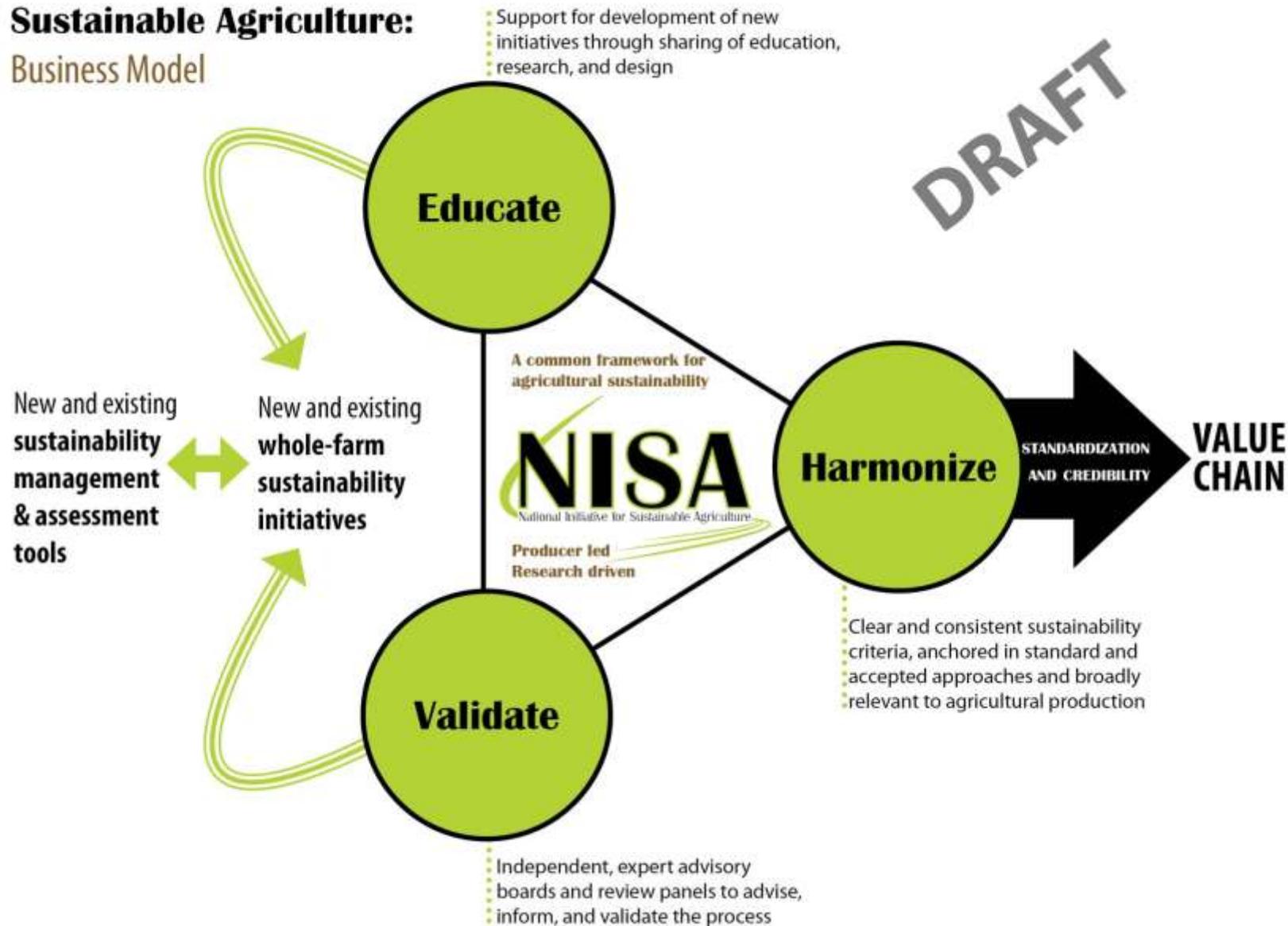
Although there are many definitions of “sustainable agriculture,” the one with the greatest potential for continued progress must be advanced by the food, feed, fiber, and fuel value chain – not directed by the consumer. NISA – the *National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture* – has evolved from a generational commitment by American producers to manage their farms sustainably. NISA is born out of a desire among producers for a whole farm sustainability initiative that simplifies the current process of multiple checklists originating from retailers, food processors, and foreign governments. Farmers want to know that sustainable agriculture is not a test and that their progress to date will be credited. It’s not a snapshot in time but rather a process of continuous improvement toward nationally recognized goals and outcomes that producers can work towards to advance their own goals of farm value, succession to future generations, and sustainability. NISA is designed to provide the agricultural community and value chain with a consistent and credible national framework for documenting the efforts and accomplishments of producers towards greater sustainability along a continuum through continuous effort and stepwise improvement.

NISA’s business model is to: (a) identify and communicate a set of sustainability outcomes and indicators; (b) collaborate with the value chain to establish consensus on the appropriateness of the outcomes and indicators; (c) establish nationally-consistent principles/criteria in a framework organization through which many stakeholder groups can seek recognition; and then (d) acknowledge emerging crop- and region-specific sustainability initiatives that meet the principles/criteria. NISA will offer such organizations educational and research support in designing new initiatives and a mechanism for confirming that they meet value chain expectations.

As regional or crop-specific initiatives evolve, they will be encouraged to implement the most appropriate metrics, practices, and measurements for documenting progress among producers, but they will begin with desired outcomes and indicators agreed upon by the value chain through NISA. Over time, NISA will create a nationally-consistent federation of sustainable agriculture initiatives across crops, climates, and markets, as well as a programmatic framework that accredits and verifies agricultural sustainability initiatives. A panel of experts will review proposed regional- or crop-specific initiatives, and NISA will verify their programmatic content for the value chain. The NISA framework will facilitate the creation of mechanisms for allowing ‘whole farm’ sustainability efforts that account for the biological, social, and economic complexities of the diverse agricultural businesses existing across the American landscape. An educational element of NISA will provide webinars, publications, website documents, and results of research and development to those organizations and groups who want help designing a sustainability program. For example, a ‘train the trainer’ method could be implemented for advancing sustainability across agricultural producer groups.

When established, this federation of agricultural sustainability initiatives will exist in lieu of a dozen checklists and value chain critiques. The federation will embrace a nationally-consistent set of goals, desired outcomes, and indicators that will be generated in consultation with the value chain, NGOs, and other partners. The specific practices used to produce different crops and livestock across regions will vary, but the NISA framework will ensure consistency and similarity across goals, outcomes, and indicators. Metrics and practices will be scientifically-based and achievable, and will improve environmental, economic, and social sustainability performance when consistently adopted over time.

The National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture: Business Model



How do we get there? First, NISA must construct the national framework and set of outcomes and indicators commonly held by producers and the value chain. There are successful models to learn from. For example, ISO 14000 certification provides internationally-consistent goals, outcomes, and indicators for environmental protection in agriculture and other industries. This status is obtained by verified implementation of standardized environmental actions that are known worldwide to produce desired outcomes. NISA is now adapting that model to more broadly address sustainability's environmental, social, and economic principles in agriculture. Key to this effort is involving producers from the beginning, and agribusiness organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders from the value chain at the appropriate time. A draft of the NISA framework will be available soon.

NISA's framework is designed to assure all parties that commodities and the information assessing their production systems are accurate and meet clearly defined sustainability expectations. Existing valuable tools (e.g. Keystone Field to Market's Fieldprint Calculator; the Stewardship Index for Specialty Crop metrics; The Sustainability Consortium's life cycle assessments; as well as commodity-specific sustainability tools in dairy, pork, potato, wine grapes, cranberry, etc.) have a place in the reporting protocols used to communicate information about sustainability to value chain customers. NISA's business model is designed to create a mechanism to integrate these tools into a whole-farm approach and leverage and promote them as broadly as possible to simplify communication of the sustainability accomplishments of American agriculture. NISA is being specifically structured to allow commodities to compare their approaches and tools; leverage each other's investments in future sustainability programs for specific commodities; create a credible and scientifically-sound set of mechanisms by which agriculture can fully address whole-farm sustainability; and objectively communicate the sustainability accomplishments, future goals, and plans for advancement.

To bring this business model on-line, NISA is evaluating the actions, timeline, resources, challenges and tools that are needed to launch NISA's framework and this federation of crop- and region-specific sustainability initiatives. We need the input of informed cooperators from across an appropriately broad spectrum of stakeholders. These will include producers, advisors from the public and private sectors, academics, value chain participants, and others. We look forward to your help.