

The National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture

A report from the second planning meeting, held March 15-16 2012 in Denver, CO.

Formed in 2010, the National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture (NISA) represents the breadth of American agriculture converging in a **producer-led, science-driven** initiative focused on within-farmgate sustainability. In November 2011, NISA formed its Provisional Board from a coalition of producer representatives spanning commodity crops, specialty crops, and animal agriculture. In March 2012, representatives from across agriculture and food value chains met and agreed to develop a neutral framework to provide credibility for, and to accelerate awareness and harmonization of various approaches and relevant tools, emphasizing the need for whole-farm management approaches to agricultural sustainability and supply chain reporting.

Below are some of the highlights and outcomes of the March meeting:

Highlights

- NISA represents the **full breadth of American agriculture**, spanning commodity crops, specialty crops, and animal agriculture and creating a platform for state, regional, national, and international groups currently investing in sustainability initiatives and/or using tools for within-farmgate sustainability reporting to come together to harmonize approaches and build the objective knowledge foundation for consistently improved outcomes.
- NISA recognizes the need for **whole-farm approaches** to the management of within-farmgate sustainability and sustainability reporting with strong links to government agencies that support the NISA approach.
- NISA will convene a membership board, an executive committee and a group of experts from across the value chain, government, NGOs and academia to develop and administer a **neutral framework** that will provide a comprehensive approach within which specific tools and approaches to describe the economic, environmental and social impacts of agriculture may be positioned.
- North American agriculture needs the means to credibly and coherently communicate achievements and progress toward more sustainable agricultural and food systems. NISA will help farm organizations and allied interests to better leverage information, tools, approaches, and efforts of organizations with aligned purpose to streamline and simplify communications within the value chain regarding the within-farmgate footprint of agriculture.

Outcomes

- NISA will continue to work with value and supply chain partners to refine clear and consistent sustainability criteria anchored in standard and accepted approaches that are broadly relevant to agricultural production.
- NISA will host a process by which a neutral framework for agricultural sustainability initiatives is developed, relieving purchasers of the burden of individually evaluating every farming operation they source from, and likewise relieving farmers of the burden of completing multiple sustainability assessments from each purchaser of their product. This approach is informed by and aligned with USDA commitments to sustainable agriculture.
- A **business model** was drafted, outlining the three major functions of NISA:
 - To provide a credible, objective, and comprehensive framework for sustainable agriculture initiatives and programs that will allow users to best fit approaches to their needs
 - To support the development of new initiatives through education, research, and other resources
 - To provide overarching credibility to these sustainability programs through a standardized, open, and objective process
- A proposed **organizational structure** and **operational model** is under review by the NISA Provisional Board. Structural components are expected to include:
 - A broad Producer Board comprised of participating producers or organizations representing them.
 - A five-member Executive Board comprised of one producer each representing commodity crops, specialty crops, and animal agriculture, plus two at-large members. The Executive Board will be elected by the larger Producer Board, and will direct NISA operations, communicate NISA's vision and value throughout the supply chain, and oversee formation and commission of the subcommittees, workgroups, and/or review panels necessary to achieve NISA's goals.
 - A Board of Advisors appointed by the Executive Board from appropriate academia, government, private sector, and NGO sources to provide independent, expert advice and conduct formal reviews and evaluations as requested by the Executive Board, NISA membership, and value chain partners.
 - A small staff team to assist the Executive Board in day-to-day NISA operation.