

# Sustainability: Not One Solution; We Need Them All

*Food futurist shares insights into creating a sustainable future for food and agriculture*

*by Kindra Gordon, field editor*

Consumers. Farmers. Conservationists. When you think of these groups of people, it is likely that different views of food and agriculture may come to mind.

Today's consumers may have a focus on organic food, regenerative agriculture, or avoiding GMOs. Conservationists, often called environmentalists, may be concerned with loss of biodiversity in wildlife populations and habitat. Farmers are often tuned in to production efficiencies and economic margins. And, often it can feel like these three groups are actively working against each other.

In spite of those different perspectives, at the core these three groups of people do have one common goal, according to Jack Bobo, who is CEO of Futurity, a food foresight company that helps brands get ahead of trends.

And that common goal says Bobo is this: "Conservationists, consumers and farmers all want the same thing: a safe, plentiful and sustainable future of food and agriculture."

Based on that, Bobo says, "If our mission is for a better future of food and agriculture, what can we do to

achieve this?" The answer begins with a simple, - yet effective, solution: we need to listen to one another — and share our stories, suggested Bobo while speaking during the Alltech ONE Virtual Experience broadcast worldwide on May, 22, 2020.

## Acknowledging concerns

With regard to the concerns of conservationists, Bobo says it is important to acknowledge that 60% of wildlife populations on the planet have disappeared between 1970 and 2014, as documented in 2018 by the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Report. And,

20% of the Amazon [rainforest] has disappeared in the last 50 years.

"This dramatic loss in biodiversity has occurred within the lifetimes of many of us," Bobo says. "Biodiversity is undergoing this incredible challenge, and things are not looking good ... So, we have this tremendous challenge of not destroying all of our wild spaces," he adds.

But he points out many misconceptions about biodiversity and global issues exist as well. People believe poverty has remained the same or increased; people

say the food system is broken, people blame all deforestation on agriculture, and people say we do not have the means to feed the rapidly growing population.

He adds, "Many people wonder: Is agriculture the problem or solution to our conservation struggles?" While people tend to believe the former, Bobo believes ag is the solution. To address this, he advises agriculture to share several important stories.

Specifically, we are producing more food on the same amount of land than we were 50–60 years ago. "This is important," Bobo says, and he explains, "If food production stays ahead of population growth that means people become better fed, they rise out of poverty, nutrition and hunger disease."

In turn, this has benefited people and the planet. Bobo reports that statistically, there is less poverty than there was 20 years ago. As well, better productivity and higher yields mean more food is being produced due to higher efficiency — which has saved a billion hectares of forest around the world. Bobo says as much as a third of all the forest would be gone today without productivity increases.

## Addressing consumers

Bobo says common concerns he hears from consumers relate to the

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need for farmers to use less fertilizer and insecticide to reduce run-off into the local environment, a push for organic farming and even more regulated farming.

In response, Bobo suggests the stories agriculture needs to share related to sustainability include explaining why these limitations or reductions are not globally feasible.

He hopes consumers will begin to understand it would be challenging to use less insecticide and fertilizer because it means farmers will probably produce less food — “If you produce less food on that farm, that means you’re going to need more farms,” Bobo explains.

Additionally, because organic agriculture produces 20–30% less food, if the whole world farmed organically, we would need to dedicate another 20–30% of land to farms, and 40% of all the land on earth is already allocated to agriculture. This would have a devastating affect, according to Bobo, including the loss of more forests.

Looking ahead, he says we need to produce more food, and we need to help consumers understand that fact. The Food and Agriculture Organization projects the need to produce 50–60% more food by 2050. Why is that the case if we are only going to see about 20% more people? It’s directly due to an improvement in income and overall wellbeing, and when people are making money and feeling well, they buy more animal protein. And more protein requires more crops to feed animals, hence, a spike in food production, Bobo explains.

A statistic Bobo emphasizes came from the former director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Jacques Diouf, who once said that the amount of food

that needs to be produced in the next 40 or 50 years is equivalent to the amount of food that was produced in the last 10,000 years. “Let me repeat that. The amount of food we need to produce in the next 40 or 50 years is greater than the amount of food produced in the last 10,000 years of human civilization,” Bobo says.

## Menu of solutions

While the challenge is daunting and agriculture is getting better, it is not getting better fast enough, Bobo says. He says an array of solutions is necessary for increasing food production and achieving sustainability. Rather than competing against each other, he suggests we need to focus on what the future will look like, and work toward opportunities instead of focusing on problems.

“We don’t need one solution. We need them all,” Bobo says.

Likewise, he suggests that instead of framing it as agriculture is the problem to be solved, we need to help them — consumers and conservationists — to understand that agriculture is the solution to the problem.

Bobo says, “We could use their help. What we find from data collected by the World Resources Institute is that if agriculture continues to improve the way it has been, 60% of the gains we need to achieve a sustainable future will happen just by farmers continuing what they are already doing. The data also talks about incentivizing steps that will increase productivity and improve efficiency in livestock production, reducing methane emissions, and using less fertilizer.

He continues, “Efficiency is something farmers want to do ... So, these are huge opportunities.



These are not challenges.”

While the global food system has faced challenges — Bobo says it was never not broken — he also told his global audience that the food system is better than it has ever been, and it will only continue to get better every day. “It is just not happening fast enough,” he says, and points out to consumers and naysayers, “If we continue to spend our time spreading false stories and narratives about farmers being the problem, we cannot actively work with them toward a solution.”

To that, Bobo also emphasizes that organic agriculture may be critical to saving the planet, but it does not mean that genetic engineering and gene editing are not. As well, he believes alternative proteins are critical to saving the planet, but so are dairy farms and livestock production.

“It takes a menu of solutions to solve a problem,” Bobo concluded.

To close, Bobo asked his audience to ask themselves a key question: Thirty years from now, will we be confident that we did everything that we could do to make the world the place that we want it to be?

And he asked listeners to remember that conservationists, consumers and farmers all want the same thing: a safe, plentiful and sustainable future of food and agriculture. **A**