



OUTCOMES REPORT

U.S. Animal Agriculture as a Solution to Global Food Systems Challenges A UN Food Systems Summit Independent Dialogue Event

Dialogue Overview

The U.S. animal agriculture community is highly engaged in the work of the UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) and has a track record of progress and ambitious commitments that align with the FSS' focus on enhancing sustainability. Americans today have access to one of the safest, most diverse, and most affordable food supplies in history, and American agricultural and food products feed millions of people around the world - thanks in large part to the efficiency, productivity, and innovation of the U.S. agriculture and food supply chain alongside the United States' robust science- and risk-based regulatory system. The U.S. animal agriculture community believes the FSS can have a positive impact on not only the future of our own U.S. food system but the global system, as well.

The Animal Agriculture Alliance, a nonprofit working to bridge the communication gap between farm and fork, took the opportunity to contribute to the FSS by convening an Independent Dialogue event titled "U.S. Animal Agriculture as a Solution to Food Systems Challenges." This Dialogue brought together stakeholders from across the U.S. animal agriculture community to engage meaningfully, explore collectively and emerge resiliently for sustainable food systems. Through engagement and discussion, the Dialogue considered animal agriculture's role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ability to be a "game changer" in delivering progress across all five Action Tracks of the FSS.

The U.S. animal agriculture community is broad and diverse, and the Dialogue event reflected that concept. Participants were carefully selected from various key stakeholder groups, including farmers and ranchers (of all sizes), animal agriculture organizations, companies (animal health, nutrition, genetics, integrators/processors), restaurant/retail/foodservice companies and organizations, environmental NGOs, dietitians, youth/young farmers and veterinarians/academics/researchers. Diversity in educational background, age, gender and geographic location was also taken into account when selecting attendees. The discussion was intentionally organized to cover as many topics as possible in order to take advantage of the various types of expertise among participants. Participants were sorted into discussion groups centered by the five Action Tracks of the FSS. Assigned facilitators led each group in a conversation around their Action Track with a set of pre-developed questions (some were common across all Action Tracks, others were unique to specific Action Tracks).

The structure of the Dialogue event worked well to allow us to achieve our goal: a broad discussion of the role U.S. animal agriculture is currently playing and can play in developing the sustainable, resilient food system of the future.

Main Findings

The overall finding of this Independent Dialogue can be summarized as: sustainability must not be viewed as a single, exclusive destination, but rather as a diverse, continuous, and inclusive journey. Participants agreed that the U.S. animal agriculture community (from farm to fork and beyond) is among the most sustainable in the world (based on life cycle assessments, increases in productivity, reductions in GHG, and other data-based measurements of sustainability) and that all stakeholders, across many different areas of expertise, different production systems, and different sizes, can and must find commonalities and work productively together.

Participants agreed that optimizing animal agriculture's environmental impact is an ambitious but attainable goal, which can only be achieved via sustained, long-term active participation of all stakeholders with a goal of constant innovation and improvement. Goals must clearly incorporate and build on significant progress thus far, which is often not well understood by key audiences (including governments and consumers). The substantial contributions and commitments across the food and agriculture supply chain represent huge improvements and also offer the greatest potential as pilots to scale for further gain.

Throughout the Dialogue, stakeholders highlighted challenges with the framing and definitions of key concepts and issues. Participants felt it was important to acknowledge that our food supply is the most effective and productive in history, with room for improvement - rather than viewing the system as inherently broken or negatively impacting people and the planet. Participants also highlighted the power of inclusive approaches - by agreeing that all production practices can be made **more** sustainable we allow all stakeholders to participate, rather than setting unrealistic extremes that exclude some communities entirely. It is also important to note that all industries have some level of environmental impact – not just agriculture. Food is foundational to our survival and health, and while animal agriculture should (and will) do all it can to address challenges of sustainability, other industries need to mitigate their impacts as well and conversations around sustainability should be inclusive and collaborative while encouraging everyone to do their part.

Defining “sustainable” and “healthy” is not easy, because in reality these words do not represent one single, universal outcome. Definitions should not overwhelm or undermine continuous improvement efforts. Sustainability and health are always context-specific and interdependent. The correct framing is important to allow understanding and agreement on the priorities and actions that are most feasible and impactful. Recognizing this, any overarching policy recommendations at the global level should allow for regional adaptation and not be overly prescriptive, as unique production systems allow animal agriculture many ways to tackle challenges differently in different countries.

Participants also highlighted the importance of holistic analysis to understand and prepare for trade-offs and areas of synthesis/reinforcement. Participants agreed that food systems must become **more** sustainable while also ensuring continued sufficient nutrient-dense food supplies that are **safe, accessible, affordable, and appropriate to diverse consumer needs**. The animal agriculture community should continue striving to optimize its nutritional and environmental impacts, and food systems should focus on encouraging consumers to build and maintain overall healthy diets, with attention to balancing needs including nutrient-density, diet quality, diet diversity, consumer acceptance, taste, value, convenience, safety, and more.

Stakeholders estimated that 60% of sustainable gains over the next 30 years will come from

conventional agriculture, and that these 30 years will be the most influential and important in the history of agriculture. Farmers and ranchers must be central to the work and to decision-making; currently where decisions are made is very distant from where change actually happens. It is not feasible for the necessary gains to be achieved without the active involvement of and engagement with conventional agriculture stakeholders who are already leading the way in this area.

Public understanding and trust of food systems is key to sustainable choices, as well as to attracting and retaining the talent needed to secure the future of the agricultural and food supply. Efforts need to be made to ensure that all voices contributing to discussions of food systems (including those involved in food marketing) are communicating accurately and not contributing to public misconceptions around sustainability. Too often emotion outweighs science in these conversations, forcing the animal agriculture community to respond to misinformation rather than proactively communicate about its commitment to doing the right thing. Participants agreed food systems must also work now to enable the next generation of farmers, ranchers, growers, and innovators across the food and agriculture supply chain.

Discussion Topic Outcomes

Discussion topic 1: Action Track 1

- ☐ Stakeholders agreed that fundamentally sustaining human life through high quality nutrition and preventing malnutrition while mitigating impact on the environment must be the main objective of Action Track 1. This can be achieved through promoting and advocating for production and processing of nutrient-dense food, including meat, poultry, dairy, eggs and seafood.
- ☐ A more open, predictable, rules-based global trading environment with fewer barriers will facilitate more efficient movement of agriculture and food products, including to regions suffering from malnutrition and food insecurity.
- ☐ While the availability of nutritious food is a key element, participants agreed that consumer awareness, education, and choice are equally important. As has been seen with COVID-19 vaccines, just because a product or service is available and proven effective does not mean that every consumer will take advantage of it. Educating the public on how all foods can be made more sustainably must be a priority addressed by the FSS. Embracing animal agriculture's potential and amplifying the cutting-edge work taking place will also help attract brilliant and inspired minds into the field of agriculture. Discussions about food choice and any attempts to make recommendations also need to be considerate of cultural relevance, religious beliefs, and other familial reasons for why people eat what they do.
- ☐ Support for small-scale stakeholders across the globe is also critical. Investments, partnerships, and support to implement lessons learned can help increase global sustainable practices across the board and help smaller businesses and farmers thrive sustainably while alleviating burdens on the environment and the food system.

Discussion topic 2: Action Track 2

- ☐ Participants expressed serious concern that the FSS may be defining sustainability and healthy in ways that exclude the majority of stakeholders in the food and agriculture supply chain. Such approaches will exclude valuable expertise, ignore practical solutions, and impact consumers' understanding of the current and future impact of their food choices. To gain the support needed to actually work, FSS approaches must be inclusive and flexible.

- ❑ Participants agreed that the FSS should focus on making diets **more** sustainable and **more** nutrient-dense, not focus only on a narrow set of policies, practices, and products that target specific foods and/or are not inclusive of diverse needs and choices. For example, fruits and vegetables provide great nutritional value, but meat, poultry, dairy and eggs are very nutrient-dense and should not be discouraged. Produce is also most likely to be wasted.
- ❑ Participants noted that nearly all foods are processed in some fashion and that food processing should be viewed in light of its role in healthy and sustainable diets, not as a negative characteristic to be limited or eliminated. Practical solutions for more diverse, healthy, affordable and sustainable diets must include innovations and improvements in food processing. Solutions that denigrate specific foods or seek to limit production, consumption, or consumer choice will not contribute to implementation of real, urgently needed solutions based on evidence and proven impacts.
- ❑ Participants agreed that progress is being made every day across the food and agriculture supply chain, including to reduce emissions, improve efficiencies and provide the best products to consumers. Participants cited numerous examples of innovations that have reduced energy, land, and water use all while producing more food for a growing population. Participants urged that all stakeholders embrace and amplify these gains to reach our shared goals and to convince the public of the value and impact of practical improvements that must be continued.

Discussion topic 3: Action Track 3

- ❑ Participants agreed that the food and agriculture supply has made considerable progress to drive more sustainable practices over recent decades, and that progress should be celebrated. Ensuring sufficient awareness, understanding, and positive attention to these advances is critical to incentivizing stakeholders to continue to invest in these practices and to increase their efforts. Efficiency and productivity must be encouraged and celebrated (no other sector denigrates efficiency; for example, fuel-efficient cars pollute less and are encouraged), and there must also be consideration of farmers' interests in being good stewards and protecting economic viability.
- ❑ Participants expressed concern that stakeholders' significant resources, time, and commitment invested in increased efficiency, productivity, quality, etc. are frequently discounted or even denigrated, discouraging efforts that should instead be praised, encouraged, and scaled up. Farmers and ranchers are particularly impacted by this vicious cycle and should be front and center in developing and implementing all solutions for more sustainable food systems.
- ❑ Participants agreed that greater consideration is needed for measuring outputs and incentivizing improvements, as well as for the incredibly difficult nature of measuring carbon output and sequestration. Discussion included creating consistent terminology and metrics for understanding improvements like emission reductions, carbon sequestration, and protecting natural resources and creating programs to adequately pay for and reward achievements in these areas.

Discussion topic 4: Action Track 4

- ❑ Participants noted the tremendous impact of the food and ag supply chain on livelihoods in the United States and the critical importance of sustaining full and productive employment and decent work for all actors along the food value chain. Participants also discussed challenges and opportunities for enabling entrepreneurship and addressing uneven access to resources.
- ❑ Participants noted that agriculture and food businesses vary widely - this is not a sector where one size fits all, so recruitment, training, and retention can be challenging. The challenges, particularly for economic viability, lifestyle (urban v. rural) and consumer perception (whether agriculture is seen as a desirable activity), also impact attracting and educating the next generation of talent. Focusing on diversity is also a high priority for the industry's future.
- ❑ Participants felt that multiple types of production systems are and must be part of more sustainable food systems - for example, organic and conventional agriculture should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Both are necessary to meet consumers' needs and achieve our common goals. FSS solutions must recognize this truth and be revised to incorporate the best aspects of multiple systems of production.

Discussion topic 5: Action Track 5

- ❑ Participants highlighted that resiliency, like sustainability, must be based on three components - economic, social, and environmental (including context related to specific geographies) and must be viewed as a journey of continuous improvement. Farmer voices emphasized that their resiliency depends very much on flexibility and adaptability, which can be hindered by overly prescriptive regulatory approaches and by lack of understanding of on-farm realities.
- ❑ Resiliency is boosted by mutual understanding and enhanced communication between stakeholders, governments, technical experts, and consumers. Youth voices agreed with farmers about the need to embrace technology and innovation and not block farmers' access to new tools. Youth voices were also particularly focused on improving ag and food stakeholders' connectivity through digital media.
- ❑ Participants felt strongly that solutions must be centered around emergency planning and infrastructure investment. Across the globe, food systems were pushed to the breaking point due to the pandemic. The FSS has the ability to revisit the flaws brought out by the pandemic and address them so that no future generation is left at a disadvantage. The food system must be flexible, with a more active and involved stakeholder base ready to address issues proactively. This will require more advanced and efficient forms of communication between stakeholders, governments and scientific experts.

Areas of Divergence

Participants in this Independent Dialogue brought to bear a wide variety of perspectives from small scale farming to advanced sciences to veterinary medicine to environmental activism, but the Dialogue revealed broad consensus that the FSS must focus on practical, broad-based, action-oriented solutions backed by science, innovation, and proven impact - solutions that include producers of all sizes and types and at many points in their journey for continuous improvement and more sustainable systems.

The FSS will impact farmers and ranchers the most of all stakeholders, and participants were concerned that some proposed approaches within the FSS currently do not adequately reflect producers' realities, acknowledge their achievements, or recognize that conventional agriculture must shoulder the majority of work needed to achieve more sustainable food systems. Therefore, greater work is needed to appropriately frame the challenges, understand the landscape and horizon, and develop solutions for meaningful and lasting change.

Participants identified key terms and concepts as not yet having appropriate, flexible approaches within the FSS - including sustainable, healthy, and nutrient-dense. As discussed in the Dialogue, sustainability is a journey, not a single or universal destination. Healthy diets are diverse, balanced, take into account nutrient density and are not based on denigrating specific nutrients, foods, and product categories. Participants also emphasized the importance of strengthening awareness of producers' contributions and incentives for further achievements, educating consumers about the food system, and fast-tracking proven policies and innovations including by taking lessons learned into developing countries.

While participants agreed that more needs to be done to provide consumers with accurate, balanced information about sustainable food systems, there was some disagreement about who is responsible for leading that charge and what level of responsibility food brands and retailers have in communicating information about animal agriculture to consumers. The animal agriculture community will need to work to become more unified in its efforts to communicate about sustainability in order to be more effective in ensuring public understanding.

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