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# A Primer for Understanding the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard

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This primer will help you understand the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020. It describes why the new Standard was created and explains the Standard, including examples of how it can be interpreted.

## What is Driving the Demand for Farmland Sustainability Assurance?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 was created to respond to the overlapping demands of key stakeholders: family farmers, farm managers, supply chains, retailers, farmland investors, and consumers. Stakeholder interest in sustainable agriculture is growing rapidly as attention to how agricultural systems affect and interact with the environment and society increases.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture employs over one billion people, produces over \$1.3 trillion of food each year, and occupies 50 percent of the world's habitable land, impacting climate, biodiversity, and water supplies.<sup>2</sup>

**Family farmers and farm managers** increasingly apply sustainability strategies to advance resiliency and efficiency, better retain talent, and reduce regulatory burdens<sup>3</sup> while addressing growing demands for assurance from supply chains.

**Supply chains and retailers** are responding to the growing interest of **consumers** in sustainable, healthy food by increasingly sourcing products which provide the assurance of sustainability.

**Investors and capital providers** increasingly expect assurance that their capital will not only generate sustainable financial returns but also contribute to a more sustainable society.<sup>4</sup>

A farmland sustainability standard can address these different needs for assurance by providing a framework to help family farmers and farm managers methodically increase agricultural sustainability and make verifiable claims to the market while simultaneously strengthening the credibility, reputation, and social license of businesses and investors across the value chain.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Why a New Agricultural Sustainability Program?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 was created because a scalable, industry-wide response to the demand for sustainability assurance in agriculture does not exist. The numerous other farm sustainability standards (over 400 globally) are either: 1) limited in scope to specific crops and regions; or 2) require specific practices that are not always adaptable to the broad diversity in agricultural systems.<sup>7</sup>

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 can be universally applied across all crops and geographies and addresses the full spectrum of environmental, social, and economic concerns. Furthermore, the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 is 'outcome-based,' which allows family farmers and farm managers to apply the Standard to their particular operating context while still generating long-term sustainability outcomes. Assurance that those outcomes are being met across a great diversity of farms is verified by independent, third-party audits.

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<sup>1</sup> Levin, J., and M. Stevenson. 2012. The 2050 criteria: Guide to responsible investment in agricultural, forest, and seafood commodities. Published by World Wildlife Fund, Washington, DC. Power, A. 2010. Ecosystem services and agriculture: tradeoffs and synergies. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 365: 2959-2971.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. 2017. Agriculture and Food. World Bank, Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> Whelan, T. and C. Fink. 2016. The Comprehensive Business Case for Sustainability. *Harvard Business Review*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Fink, L. A. 2020. Fundamental Reshaping of Finance. BlackRock, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, S., Cabbage, F., Eicheldinger, C. 2012. Impacts of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Forest Certification in North America. *Journal of Forestry* 110(2): 79-88.

<sup>6</sup> Levin, J., and M. Stevenson. 2012. The 2050 criteria: Guide to responsible investment in agricultural, forest, and seafood commodities. WWF, Washington, DC; Molenaar, J. and J. Kessler. 2017. The business benefits of using sustainability standards: A meta-review. Commissioned by ISEAL Alliance. Aidenvironment, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. <http://www.standardsimpacts.org/sites/default/files/Aidenvironment%20report%20business%20benefits%20of%20standards.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> International Trade Centre. 2017. Standard Map: Your roadmap to a sustainable future. Geneva, Switzerland.



## How was Leading Harvest Standard 2020 developed?

The Standard was drafted by a team of farm managers, environmental organizations, asset managers, and agricultural sustainability experts, and it was modeled after a widely-adopted sustainable forestry certification standard, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Other leading agricultural standards and programs were also consulted to prepare the draft Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020, including (but not limited to): FAO Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agricultural Systems Guidelines, GLOBALG.A.P., National Sustainable Agriculture Standard – LEO-4000, Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Network, Round Table on Responsible Soy, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform, Unilever Sustainable Agriculture Code, and UN Principles for Responsible Investment.

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 was then field tested and reviewed by stakeholders, representing farmers, environmental groups, farm labor, agricultural scientists, rural communities, and agricultural services. The field test occurred in major agricultural areas of the U.S. on 22,000 acres to assess the practicality and scalability of the Standard. The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 was also shared in three workshops in major agricultural regions (California, Iowa, and Georgia) with key stakeholders who suggested over 400 improvements, many of which were incorporated into the Standard. The results of the field test and stakeholder feedback were used to revise the Standard so that it would be scalable, practical, and responsive to stakeholders' concerns and interests.

## What is the Leading Harvest Standard 2020?

The Standard is a third-party audited certification standard that serves to provide assurance for the sustainability of farmland management. Farmland managers and owners can use the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 to become certified, certify farmland under their management, and then make verifiable sustainability claims to the market regarding their management.

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 is outcome-based through the use of qualitative indicators that serve as operational goals. It does not prescribe practices necessary to conform with the Standard; rather, it provides family farmers and farm managers the flexibility to select best practices for sustainable outcomes. This approach allows for adaptation across crops and geographies, recognizing that even a single crop can require unique management strategies in different regions. For example, biannual soil measurements are a useful management tool for determining nutrient application on corn in the Midwest; in the Southeast, on the other hand, soils retain so little nitrogen between seasons that a biannual soil measurement provides little valuable insight for growing corn. An outcome-based approach recognizes that prescribing the same processes and metrics across geographies can be ineffective. By encouraging farmers to innovate new approaches and apply best management practices suited for their crops and consistent with regional best practices, management results are improved, and greater sustainability outcomes are achieved.

This approach would not be possible without a credible system to ensure that desired outcomes are being met. Third-party auditing conducted by independent and accredited certification bodies is used to verify whether the practices applied are sufficient to conform with an outcome described by an indicator.

Finally, the Standard explicitly requires farmers to improve their operations continuously, year-over-year, following improvement in regional best management practices. The Standard itself is revised on a regular basis through a public process to ensure it reflects the latest insights and advances regarding agricultural sustainability. Collectively, these processes are part of the continuous improvement aspect of the Standard.



## What topics does the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 address?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 addresses thirteen topics that are core to farmland sustainability. These were selected through the review of a number of other agricultural standards and because they reflect major stakeholder concerns and address major risk and materiality issues:

1. Sustainable Agriculture Management (external factors)
2. Soil Health and Conservation
3. Water Resources
4. Use of Agricultural Chemicals
5. Energy Use, Air Quality, and Climate Change
6. Waste Management
7. Conservation of Biodiversity
8. Protection of Special Sites (social and cultural)
9. Local Communities
10. Personnel and Contract Management Company Employees
11. Legal and Regulatory Compliance
12. Management Review and Continual Improvement
13. Tenant-operated Operations

## What is addressed by the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 can be used by any family farmer, farm manager, or organization that owns or has management authority for farmland (“*Program User*”). It has special provisions for applying tenant-operated farmland that recognize a tenant’s “rights to quiet enjoyment” and contract law.

## Are large and small farms assessed by the same third-party auditors?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 can be applied to farm operations of any size. All *Program Users* are held to the same Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020, but the expectation of conformance evidence may vary with the scope and scale of the *Program User*, since the size of the farm operation influences the risk level that adverse impacts may pose to society and the environment.

## How is the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 organized?

The Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020 is hierarchically structured, starting with principles at the highest level and ending with indicators at the finest level (Table 1). Principles, objectives, performance measures, and indicators provide increasing, directive detail about the vision of the Standard. At the finest level, conformance to indicators can provide evidence that the principles are being upheld. Indicators are contextual — that is, they only apply to farms where relevant (e.g., a water availability indicator would likely not apply if irrigation is unnecessary). To determine conformance of a farm operation to the Standard, an auditor will review the conformance evidence for each indicator and assess whether the conformance evidence is sufficient to address the requirements described by the indicator, allowing for full consideration of local conditions and regional agricultural best management practices.



Table 1. The hierarchical format of a standard, including definitions and examples of principles, objectives performance measures, indicators, and conformance evidence.

## Definitions

## Leading Harvest Standard 2020 Examples

A **Principle** is a statement that expresses the **vision and direction** for sustainable agriculture with respect to one or more environmental, social, and economic topics.

### **Principle 2. Soil Productivity and Health:**

To maintain or enhance long-term soil health and productivity, and to protect soil from degradation.

An **Objective** is a fundamental **goal** of sustainable agriculture with respect to one or more of the **Principles**.

### **Objective 2. Soil Health and Conservation:**

To maintain or enhance soil health to optimize crop yield and protect long-term agricultural soil productivity.

A **Performance Measure** is a statement that identifies key **criterion or criteria** for assessing performance and compliance of a farm operation with an **Objective**.

### **Performance Measure 2.1 Soil Health:**

Apply agriculture practices and nutrients to achieve crop yield and maintain or enhance agricultural soil health.

An **Indicator** is a specific **metric** that provides qualitative or quantitative information about the performance of a farm operation that is integral to assessing conformance to a standard's **Performance Measures**.

### **Indicator 2.1.1 Soil Fertility:**

Implement agricultural practices (e.g., tillage systems, cover cropping, addition of soil amendments) to maintain or enhance soil fertility and physical and biological characteristics, and minimize nutrient loss to water and air.

**Conformance evidence** is specific information used to assess whether farm operations have met **Indicator** requirements, including written documents, statements, measurements, other verifiable information, and/or observations of behavior, practices, technology, and conditions.

### **Some examples of optional Conformance Evidence:**

Verbal description of tillage systems and cover cropping practices, including goals; observations from field visits; invoices for cover cropping and/or soil amendment spreading contracts; soil sampling results; nutrient management plans; records of workshop attendance or trainings related to soil health and fertility.



## What is Conformance Evidence? What will an auditor assess during an assessment?

An auditing process is used to assess conformance to the Standard. An auditor takes into account local conditions to determine whether a farm operation is in conformance with the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020. Auditors will be required to use **Conformance Evidence** (Table 2) to evaluate whether a farm operation is in conformance with an **Indicator**. For example, a farm operation would not need to apply all of the **Conformance Evidence** listed in Table 2 in order to be in conformance with Indicator 2.1.1, but it would need to have sufficient conformance evidence to satisfy an auditor that the **Indicator** is being met. If the farm operation is in conformance with all of the relevant **Indicators**, then the farm operation is in conformance with the Leading Harvest Farmland Management Standard 2020, and the *Program User* can be certified.

Table 2. An example of a draft Performance Measure, Indicator, and Conformance Evidence for Objective 2. Soil Health.

<b>Performance Measure 2.1 Soil Health:</b> Apply agricultural practices and nutrients to achieve crop yield and maintain or enhance agricultural soil health.					
<b>Examples of Conformance Evidence</b> (conformance would not require implementation of all the evidence listed here or conformance evidence for each indicator from each category below)					
Indicator	Practices	Communication and Training	Documentation	Monitoring	KPIs
<b>Indicator 2.1.1 Soil Fertility: Implement agricultural practices (e.g., tillage systems, cover cropping, addition of soil amendments) to maintain or enhance soil fertility and physical and biological characteristics, and minimize nutrient loss to water and air.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement low-nutrient input agricultural practices when practical</li> <li>• Implement appropriate tillage system to manage or enhance soil fertility and structure (e.g., varies with crop type)</li> <li>• Apply cover crop and/or perennial crops to maximize plant canopy cover and minimize nutrient loss and soil exposure where appropriate (e.g., varies with crop type)</li> <li>• Apply soil amendments (e.g., manure) to maintain/enhance soil organic matter when suitable for crops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periodically review soil fertility maintenance practices with manager/tenant</li> <li>• Oversight of agricultural practices provided by a qualified agricultural professional</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periodic inspection report</li> <li>• An up-to-date nutrient (or nitrogen) management plan</li> <li>• Records of cultural practices and yield</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periodically inspect fields to assess maintenance of soil fertility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cropland under soil conservation practices (percent [%] of cropland in conservation tillage, cover crop, and/or perennial crops)</li> <li>• Soil fertility (acres, percent [%] of cropland where fertility is maintained)</li> </ul>