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German Industry Leaders Impressed by U.S. Sustainability Efforts

Report Categories:

Retail Foods

Export Promotion Programs

Dairy and Products

Oilseeds and Products

Fishery Products

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Report Highlights:

FAS Berlin hosted a roundtable discussion on sustainability of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries with participants from both sides of the Atlantic at the U.S. Embassy Berlin on October 30, 2014. Members of the U.S. Sustainability Alliance and representatives from German agriculture and food industry shared with one another what sustainability means in their respective fields. German participants were impressed by what U.S. agriculture is already doing and demonstrated a strong interest to learn more.

Both sides agreed that this should just be the first step and called for a continuous information exchange.

General Information:

An alliance of U.S. agriculture, fishery and forestry organizations met with industry leaders of the food supply chain in Germany on October 30, 2014. The roundtable discussion was held at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin to exchange information and establish an ongoing dialogue about production and conservation methods practiced along the food value chains and the forestry sectors in the United States and the EU. The dialogue aims to underscore the diversity of approaches to reach the common goal of sustainability against the backdrop of growing food and nutrition demands in the world.

Kelly Stange, Agricultural Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, welcomed 25 participants to the roundtable and highlighted that sustainability has become an integral aspect of doing business across global agricultural and food supply chains. She stressed that the exchange of information at the roundtable between German industry representatives and U.S. producers was an extremely valuable forum to learn about each country's approaches to sustainability.

Amy Philpott and Benno van der Laan, representing the alliance of U.S. organizations, explained that a survey of EU stakeholders in 2013 had shown a deep disconnect between European perceptions and U.S. agricultural production practices. Benno van der Laan stated that the United States is generally seen by stakeholders in the EU as less sustainable than the EU and that U.S. agriculture does not get much credit in the EU for its conservation systems and laws. They gave an overview on the history of laws in the United States that govern sustainable production. Ron Moore, soybean grower from Illinois, Chad Frahm, U.S. Dairy Export Council, and Nelly Masson, Alaska Seafood and Food Export, showed how U.S. producers conserve land, water, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States in practice. They also gave examples of how U.S. regulations affect producers and the challenges they face to be in compliance with federal requirements.

This was followed by presentations on sustainability in Germany and the EU by representatives of the German agricultural industry, namely the German Farmers Union, the German Fisheries Association, a representative from a food processing and an agricultural input providing company, respectively.

Questions and comments from the German participants in the Q&A session included:

- In Germany, sustainability is often reduced to its ecologic aspect. What would you answer if an NGO asked you about U.S. agriculture and its impact on biodiversity?
- In Germany some people advocate for a 5-10 percent set-aside area for biodiversity conservation. What is the United States doing in terms of conservation area?
- "Product environmental footprint" (i.e. a measurement of the degree of damage done to the environment by producing the product) is a new buzz word. What is your opinion of it?
- German dairy processors are worried about too many fragmented sustainability standards by various groups and retailers. They fear it might result having to have multiple dairy collection trucks service the same route in order to segment the milk that was produced according to different standards.

- Much of what the food retail in Germany is doing driven by consumer demands.
- Many Germans are concerned about sustainable production of the products they consume. By using sustainability claims retailers in Germany sell a good conscience. What do you do in the USA to avoid a similar development?
- U.S. communication efforts on sustainability should include consumers. Provide consumers an opportunity to know U.S. culture and see how you raise food.
- Do not underestimate how movies shape the image of the USA, for examples movies shown at the annual Berlinale festival in Berlin.
- There are profound differences in attitudes between German and U.S. people. By and large U.S. citizens show a risk based approach while Germans have a process based approach. This results in a big difference in a) which production techniques are or are not accepted and b) production costs.

Comment: The German participants were impressed by the extent of legislation covering sustainability as well as with the fact that first such legislation dates back to the 1930s. They were surprised by the various industry programs and showed a strong interest in further information.

Background: The round table was organized in response to a survey of stakeholders in 2013 that showed a considerable lack of awareness of the extensive range of conservation measures employed by the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sectors in the U.S. Similarly, the survey showed an interest by the U.S. stakeholders in gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the forces driving the sustainability agenda in the European Union (EU). The need to engage in discussion and improve understanding is increasingly important given the increased focus on sustainability issues in the EU over the course of the past year and the parallel issue regarding food issue perceptions in the U.S.-EU Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (T-TIP) negotiations. The workshop was organized as a roundtable rather than a lecture to support a better understanding between participants.

The alliance of members is comprised of

- the U.S. Soybean Export Council,
- the USA Rice Federation,
- the North American Export Grain Association,
- the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI),
- the American Hardwood Export Council,
- the USA Poultry and Egg Council,
- Food Export Midwest,
- Food Export Northeast,
- the U.S. Dairy Export Council and
- the U.S. Grains Council.

For further information, see – www.thesustainabilityalliance.us

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