

Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations

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# About Food Alliance

Food Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that defines sustainability in agriculture and food handling operations with sustainability standards and a comprehensive third-party certification program that addresses a comprehensive range of consumer and industry concerns. Food Alliance works for safe and fair working conditions, humane treatment of animals, and careful stewardship of ecosystems.

Products that display the Food Alliance Certified seal include meats, shellfish, eggs, dairy, grains, legumes, mushrooms, a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, prepared products made with these certified ingredients, and ornamental plants. For more information visit [www.foodalliance.org.](http://www.foodalliance.org/)

# Overview: Food Alliance Tools for Producers

Food Alliance (FA) provides agricultural producers with a suite of tools to assess, manage, and certify sustainability practices. These tools help farmers, ranchers and growers manage their operations for environmentally, socially and economically sound outcomes.

* FA Standards provide a comprehensive definition to guide producers in achieving greater sustainability in their operations.
* FA Evaluation Tools allow producers to assess current sustainability performance and set sustainability objectives – either as a prelude to certification or as a best management practice. Third- party inspectors use the Evaluation Tools to determine if an operation meets the requirements of the Food Alliance Certification program.
* FA Certification Program is a voluntary and credible way for producers to distinguish their sustainably-managed operations and products in the marketplace, to customers and consumers.

How are the Food Alliance Tools created?

The Food Alliance Standards, corresponding Evaluation Tools and certification criteria are developed with input from a broad group of stakeholders. Initially, Food Alliance staff work with a consultant to draft the criteria. A select group of scientific researchers, usually from universities and public agencies, provide the first round of review and comment.

Once those comments are integrated into the criteria, a second round of review gathers comments from those with expertise in the standard area, such as industry organizations, private consultants, and non-profit staff (e.g. consumer group representatives, farm labor representatives, and environmentalists). Second round comments are then integrated into the criteria before Food Alliance inspectors, Food Alliance producers and handler/processors, and other practitioners provide final review.

The final draft is field tested prior to the adoption of the criteria. The names of all consultants and reviewers are listed at the end of the criteria, for those interested in seeing who had input. Footnotes are often provided to ensure clarity and consistency of interpretation.

How are the Food Alliance Tools maintained?

Food Alliance values continual improvement as a key component to sustainable management of agricultural operations. Similarly, Food Alliance conducts continuous review of its standards and criteria for relevance and effectiveness in assessing sustainable practices and outcomes.

When necessary, revisions are made to the standards and evaluation tools through a consultation and review process similar to that described above for the creation of new criteria. Affected certified operations are notified in advance of changes and provided reasonable time into compliance with new certification expectations.

# Structure of the Food Alliance Standards and Evaluation Tools

Food Alliance Standards set a high bar that recognizes innovation and continual improvement. Growers may receive credit for innovative practices that achieve the intended social, environmental, and economic outcomes. Likewise, growers participate in defining continual improvement goals, and are encouraged to define their own path for achieving those goals.

Food Alliance Sustainability Standards are organized by "standards areas." Standards areas are high-level, meaningful components of social and environmental sustainability that can be managed in an operation (e.g. Soil and Water Conservation).

Food Alliance Evaluation Tools detail evaluation criteria pertinent to each standards area. Evaluation criteria comprise a list of essential components for successful management within each standards area. The bulk of the criteria are scored criteria which yield a score based on performance levels (e.g. a score of 3 out of 4 on soil organic matter management). Evaluation Tools also include fixed evaluation criteria that yield a yes/no determination (e.g., no use of prohibited pesticides).

An operator or inspector uses the Evaluation Tool to measure performance to the corresponding Sustainability Standard. The Evaluation Tool includes all standard areas and their evaluation criteria. Outcomes of management practices are arranged into levels of achievement within each evaluation criterion:

Level 1: Meets legal requirements, or, in the absence of law, minimum expectations Level 2: Common practice or industry standard

Level 3: Progressive management with demonstrated environmental stewardship and social responsibility Level 4: Visionary management with exceptional effort to meet, and achievement of, social and environmental goals

Indicators provide specific suggestions for how level of achievement can be assessed for each evaluation criterion. In the context of a Food Alliance inspection, indicators are used by the inspector to verify and validate achievement within each level. In the context of self assessment, indicators provide guidance for achievement within each level.

Food Alliance Certified: Sustainability Certification Program

The voluntary Food Alliance Certification Program gives producers a credible way to distinguish their sustainably-managed operation and products in the marketplace to customers and consumers. With certification, products grown by these operations are eligible to display a Food Alliance Certified eco-label.

Certification to the Food Alliance Standards means the operation is managed with a demonstrated focus on sustainability practices as determined by a rigorous assessment that includes an on-site inspection for compliance with public, peer-reviewed criteria.

During certification, an independent third-party verifies management practices against the Food Alliance Evaluation Tools. Following a rigorous on-site inspection, an independent verifier determines whether to award certification. Certification is a tool that helps add credibility to sustainability claims through independent verification to meaningful standards.

What are the requirements for certification?

Producers seeking certification to the Food Alliance Standards must accomplish the following, as verified by regular, third-party site inspections:

* Meet all fixed evaluation criteria;
* Achieve an average level 3 (out of 4) performance for evaluation criteria within any given standard area (progressive management with demonstrated environmental stewardship and social responsibility);
* Maintain ongoing requirements for setting goals and achieving continual improvement.

What is the certification process?

Producers interested in pursuing Food Alliance Certification should first read the Food Alliance Sustainability Standards and Evaluation Tools relevant to their operation, paying close attention to any the crop- or species- specific criteria for the products to be sold as Food Alliance Certified.

Once prospective Food Alliance Certified producer is familiar with the standard, evaluation criteria and certification requirements, and feel that certification is right for their operation, they may begin the certification process. The process includes application, on-site inspection, review of inspection results, receipt of certificate, licensing agreement, and label submission. Information and application materials are available on the web: [www.foodalliance.org/certification](http://www.foodalliance.org/certification)

What type of operations are best suited for Food Alliance certification?

Food Alliance certification best suits producers who 1) actively manage their operations with environmental and community impacts in mind, 2) have a commitment to continually strive to innovate and do better, and 3) wish to differentiate their company and its products in the marketplace through thoughtful marketing that highlights their sustainable practices.

Producers interested in pursuing Food Alliance certification should understand that certification is a tool that helps add credibility to their sustainability claims through outside verification to meaningful standards.

Learn more information about the Food Alliance Certification program: email: [info@foodalliance.org](mailto:info@foodalliance.org)

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# Overview: Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations

The Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations provides a comprehensive definition to help crop producers achieve greater sustainability outcomes. Performance to the standard is measured using the corresponding Food Alliance Evaluation Tool for Crop Operations.

The Food Alliance Evaluation Tools provides growers with a structured methodology to self-assess current sustainability performance – and set sustainability objectives – either as a prelude to certification or as a best management practice. Third-party inspectors use the Evaluation Tools to conduct on-site inspections, the results of which determine whether an operation meets the requirements of the Food Alliance Certification program.

What issues does the Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations address?

The standard addresses a comprehensive range of consumer and industry concerns, including: soil and water conservation, nutrient management; wildlife habitat and biodiversity conservation; integrated pest, disease and weed management and pesticide risk reduction; safe and fair working conditions, and; no genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or plant material may be sold as Food Alliance Certified.

To what types of operations does the crop standard apply?

The standard applies to all North American crop producers with outdoor production systems, including field and row crops, orchards, vineyards, and cranberry operations. The standard does not apply to hydroponics or greenhouse production.

Why did Food Alliance develop the Sustainability Standard for Crop Operations? The Standard for Crop Operations is the original Food Alliance Sustainability Standard.

In 1994, Oregon State University, Washington State University and the Washington State Department of Agriculture secured funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for a project called The Northwest Food Alliance to create market incentives for adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. The project sponsored on-farm research and grower collaboration to promote use of compost, cover cropping, and strip tillage to improve soil quality and protect water resources.

In 1996, project leaders commissioned a groundbreaking study on consumer attitudes towards food and the environment (published as the Hartman Reports), which revealed a large and diverse consumer audience interested in buying more sustainable products.

How did Food Alliance develop the Sustainability Standard for Crop Operations?

The first Food Alliance “stewardship guidelines” to define sustainable agricultural practices for fruit and vegetable growers in the Pacific Northwest were drafted in 1997, in collaboration with a diverse group of agricultural and food industry stakeholders, including: farming, ranching, food processing and manufacturing, distribution, retail, university and agency scientists, and advocates for consumer affairs, labor, animal welfare, and the environment. Today these original guidelines are the core of all Food Alliance Sustainability Standards.

The purpose of the guidelines was to establish and maintain meaningful, practical and scientifically defensible standards for sustainable food production and facilities management, and to ensure that related policies and procedures support the desired social and environmental outcomes and are fairly and consistently applied.

Since 1997, the original Food Alliance stewardship guidelines underwent numerous revisions and improvements to become the Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations.

# Content of the Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations

Food Alliance Sustainability Standards are organized by "standards areas." Standards areas are high-level, meaningful components of social and environmental sustainability that can be managed in an operation.

This document lists all standards areas and evaluation criteria for the Food Alliance Standard for Crop Operations. For the full and comprehensive listing of evaluation criteria, performance levels and indicators refer to the Food Alliance Evaluation Tool(s) for Crop Operations: Food Alliance Whole Farm Evaluation Tool and Production-specific Evaluation Tool (if applicable).

Standard Are a: Soil and Water Conservation, Nutrient Management

Producers protect water and soil resources by using methods such as: creating buffer zones along waterways, reducing chemical and sediment runoff, managing animal wastes to prevent ground and/or surface water contamination, managing grazing, and using tillage practices that conserve organic matter and soil aggregation. Producers conserve water by encouraging infiltration and storage of rainfall in the soil and increase irrigation water efficiency through soil moisture monitoring and the use of new irrigation technologies. Producers reduce erosion and protect soils by optimizing plant cover throughout the year, by establishing permanent vegetative cover in orchards and vineyards, by using pastures, rangeland, and rotational grazing, and by selecting tillage technologies that minimize degradation of soil quality.

Producers conserve and recycle nutrients by converting organic wastes into productive uses and by seeking ways to generate nutrients on the operation through such methods as cover cropping, on-site composting, and integrating livestock into crops production, where appropriate. While chemical fertilizer applications may be necessary in order to bring soil nutrient levels into proper balance, management practices lead to decreased use of commercial fertilizers over time.

*Scored Criteria Address:*

* Continuing Education for Soil and Water Conservation
* Buffer Strips Around Waterways
* Soil Erosion Prevention
* Tillage Selection Practices and Soil Compaction Prevention
* Irrigation Systems
* Irrigation Water Conservation
* Nutrient Management
* Soil Organic Matter Management

Standard Area: Integrated Pest, Disease and Weed Management; Pesticide Risk Reduction Food Alliance certified producers make informed decisions regarding pest management and pesticide use.

They employ cultural and biological pest prevention strategies to reduce or eliminate the need for a pesticide application. When pesticides are needed, they select effective materials with fewer known environmental and health hazards. Food Alliance producers properly maintain application equipment to ensure precise applications and monitor weather conditions to prevent pesticide drift. When combined, these practices create an Integrated Pest Management strategy adapted to local farm/ranch conditions. As such, Food Alliance producers are able to deliver economically effective pest control while minimizing negative impacts to human health and the environment.

*Scored Criteria Address:*

* Production plan includes Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
* Pesticide record keeping
* Pest prevention, avoidance, monitoring and suppression
* Protection plans
* Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program outcomes
* Ecological service management outcomes
* Risk management outcomes for pesticide risk
* Coordinated whole operation management of pests
* Hazardous material storage
* Application equipment calibration and pesticide drift management
* Food Alliance Prohibited Pesticide List

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Standard Area: Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity Conservation

Producers foster vegetative cover, food, and water resources necessary for habitat by using methods such as establishing or maintaining biological corridors, managing mowing and grazing cycles, and restoring or protecting wetlands, prairies and woodlands. They take steps to provide habitat for beneficial insects in order to reduce the need for insecticides. Predator control is managed using least impact possible, and trapping/slaughter is only used as a last resort.

*Scored Criteria Address:*

* Continuing Education for Wildlife Habitat Conservation
* Farm Biodiversity Plan
* Reducing On-Farm Threats to Wildlife
* Biodiversity conservation in cropped or grazed areas
* Biodiversity conservation in natural or unused areas
* Invasive species prevention and management
* Linking individual wildlife habitat conservation activities together

Standard Area: Safe and Fair Working Conditions

Producers develop employment policies in order to establish open channels for communicating with employees about such issues as workplace safety and job satisfaction. They provide incentives and opportunities for the development of employee skills and incorporate quality of life issues into daily decision making for themselves, their families and employees.

*Scored Criteria Address:*

* Minors, children and family members in the workplace
* Grievance procedures and policies
* Recognizing and supporting employee input for workplace improvement
* Farm Worker Support Services
* Discipline process
* Nondiscrimination policy
* Hiring practices and communicating expectations and policies
* Work force development and new skills training
* Compensation practices
* Employee benefits
* Worker housing and family support services
* Pesticide handler/applicator safety
* Hazardous materials emergency management
* Sanitation and general safety

Fixed Criterion: No Genetically Modified Organisms ( GMO) or Seeds Sold as Food Alliance Certified

In order to avoid risks to human and animal health, the environment, economic wellbeing of farmers, food security, and export markets, production of GMOs is discouraged. GMO crops may be produced on the farm, but may not be produced or sold as a Food Alliance Certified product. Parallel production is prohibited.

Fixed Criterion: No Prohibited Pesticides

The Food Alliance Prohibited Pesticide List (PPL) is based on the WHO Recommended Classification of Pesticides by Hazard (2009). The PPL consists of materials classified as extremely hazardous or highly hazardous on the WHO list that are registered for use by the USEPA. Exceptions are allowed if the use of a material on the PPL is required by law or required for export.

Fixed Criterion: Continual Improvement

Producers are committed to setting goals and assessing their progress toward these goals by monitoring for impacts of decisions on their nursery, family, employees and the environment.