

Slow Money Maine

Sustainability Benchmarks and practices for consideration
(updated Feb. 2016)

Preamble: Slow Money Maine has a primary goal of connecting investors with local farms and other food-related businesses as well as organizations that support these endeavors. As a secondary goal, but no less important, is to promote a sustainable local food economy. In this context “sustainability” is not a precise measure but rather an engagement in a process. A process that brings together the collective experience and resources of SMM participants to make the work we do reflect a model of sustainability.

There are often more questions than answers when it comes to meeting a standard for sustainability, with the term “sustainable” now used in many contexts with broad definition. In order to assist the participants in SMM to integrate more sustainable practices, a forum for conversation must exist. The question of how we make our farm & other food-related businesses more sustainable is best answered through shared experience, collaborative problem solving and observed results.

Simply applying one definition of sustainability to all food business models limits our capacity to create tailored plans, appropriate timelines for implementation, and ongoing observation and adjustment.

Task: To establish protocols for meeting sustainability benchmarks for the work of SMM participants. What is the mechanism that puts the question of sustainability in each transaction between investor and the recipient of funds?

Areas of Focus: For a model of sustainability to thrive it is best applied with equal purpose in the areas of economy, ecology and culture. Any food-related business operating with the long-term health of the ecological processes that sustain it must also be economically viable and supported by the local culture. These three areas of focus help frame the questions we ask with regard to “whether we are achieving an acceptable level of sustainability” in our practices.

Some of the questions we might ask within these three categories include:

Economy

- What is the demand for my food product/service and do I have the capacity to fill it?
- Am I competing with other local farms & other food-related businesses for the same market? How can I collaborate to expand the market rather than compete?
- What is the specific economy of scale for my business...what is too big or too small?
- How does my debt burden impact my quality of life?

Ecology

- Am I using organic practices on my farm or in my food-related business? If not, how do I transition to using them?

- What are the nutrient/ingredient imports and the sources of these coming to my operation? Can I close the gaps between local and imported sources and how do I accomplish that?
- Can I use renewable energy sources or co-generation in my operation?
- What is my method of distribution...can I set up cooperatives or regional points of operation that reduce trucking distances?

Culture

- Is the local community aware of what is produced/offered at this farm or other food-related business and do they support my livelihood?
- What is the engagement level with the benefits of local food?
- Are people in my community concerned with the preservation of farmland?
- What is the level of support for local food businesses, & what are the local businesses that are succeeding?
- Am I educating the next generation to continue the work of supporting a local food economy and farming lifestyle?

Strategies for integrating sustainable practices: Establishing a consistent process for engagement of SMM participants is a critical part of our work. Access to resources, successful models and peer reviews are essential components of this process. Some of the strategies SMM can employ towards the goal of more sustainable practices include:

- Opportunities for peer review of business plans and current, or planned, farming practices, processing operations or distribution systems.
- Access to farms & other food-related businesses that have successful models regarding sustainable outcomes.
- Resources for technical assistance in the areas of renewable energy, organic farming, efficient design etc.
- Create interactive channels of communication between participants, the larger network of Slow Money and the general public. Utilize the web, organize conferences, provide up to date resources and support working groups.
- Acknowledge that this is a work in progress and keep an open and engaging dialogue going.

Assessing outcomes: Are we growing a culture of people working cooperatively to create, support and sustain a local food system for the long term? How do we gauge our successes?