

SLOW MONEY MAINE

OUTLINE FOR SUSTAINABLE BENCHMARKS

PREAMBLE: Slow Money Maine has a primary goal of connecting investors with local farms, food processors, food distributors, and organizations that support these endeavors. As a secondary goal, but no less important, is to promote a sustainable local farming 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 do we make our farming, our businesses more sustainable is best answered through shared experience, collaborative problem solving and observed results.

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

TASK: To establish protocol 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. A farm 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 regards to “are we 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 our product and do we have the capacity to fill it.
- Are we competing with other local farms or businesses for the same market? How can we 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 –

- Is the farm using organic practices, if not how do we transition to using them.
- What are the nutrient imports and the source of these nutrients to my farming operation. Can we close the gaps between on farm sources and imported and how.
- Can we use renewable energy sources or co-generation in our operations?

- 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 on my farm and do they support my livelihood.
 - What is the engagement level on the benefits of local food?
 - Are people in my community concerned with the preservation of farmland?
 - What is the level of support for local businesses, what are the local businesses that are succeeding?
 - Are we educating the next generation to continue the work of supporting a local economy and farming lifestyle?

STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES: Establishing a consistent process for engagement for SMM participants is a critical part of our work. Access to resources, successful models and peer review 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 or 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.

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