

Hanging a hat on sustainability

Oregon's Fulton Provision becomes the first certified-sustainable U.S. meat company -- and customers like it

(MEATPOULTRY.com, March 28, 2008)

by Steve Bjerklie

While the U.S. meat industry struggled in March to recover from the Hallmark/Westland animal-handling debacle and historically huge 143-million-pound beef recall, another company made a headline of a different type. Fulton Provision Co., a purveyor based in Portland, Ore., and a unit of SYSCO, the food distribution conglomerate, became the first meat company in the country that's certified for sustainable agricultural and production practices, as verified by third-party audits, by Food Alliance, a non-profit Oregon sustainability audit and certification agency. The industry might hope that the future brings more news of the Fulton Provision variety and a lot less of the Hallmark/Westland kind.

"We've had a lot of interest in this for several years," Tom Semke, Fulton's senior vice president of sales and marketing, told *MEAT&POULTRY*. "As a SYSCO company, we're expected to be energy-efficient and to have outstanding environmental practices. But the Food Alliance focused our efforts. We wanted something to hang our hats on, frankly, because there's so much fluff in the industry. Just because someone says they're sustainable or environmentally aware doesn't mean they are. But now we've got the certification to prove it."

Sysco bought Fulton, which was founded by the Walther family in 1921 and became a pioneer in portion-cutting meat for the airline industry, in 2001, giving the big distributor greater presence in the specialty and high-end niche meat categories.

Food Alliance has certified farms and ranches for 10 years. Two years ago they branched into food-handling, and so far, according to Scott Exo, the Alliance's executive director, the group has certified 15 units for sustainability. "The certification is a way for these companies to get some outside advice for how to move the needle further toward environmental awareness and sensitivity," he commented.

"The neat thing about the process with Fulton Provision was discovering and bringing to light the progressive processes they were already engaged in," Exo added.

Semke said that Fulton had to make a few changes in its operation to meet Food Alliance's sustainability criteria, such as changing some chemicals to more environmentally friendly substances. But the company already had a leg up on the requirements because it could trace back to the originating source all of the products it sells to its customers, which includes foodservice outlets. Exo pointed out that Fulton is a major distributor of Country Natural Beef (formerly known as Oregon Country Beef), which is already certified under the Food Alliance program. Fulton also uses biodiesel fuel in its delivery trucks, enforces minimum tonnage requirements on delivery routes so trucks aren't hauling empty or nearly

empty trailers, recycles the water in its packaging-machine chillers and is working on methods to process waste fat into biofuel. The company has maintained an extensive materials recycling program for several years.

Certification, Exo added, "is a way for a company to analyze the impact of its operation on the environment, on employee welfare, on energy efficiency. Many companies are well-intended about those things, but the certification process requires attention in those areas. It's a way to look at an operation from a little bit broader view than is traditional, which tends to be all nuts and bolts."

"It's been a very positive development in our relationships with our customers," Semke told *M&P*. In a press statement, Mark Swenson, regional vice president for Bob Appetit Management Co., an important Fulton customer, said: "It means something when a partner like Fulton is willing to take that extra step and get Food Alliance certified. It gets my attention."

Exo said he's beginning to hear from other meat companies, including Tyson Foods, but at the moment no certifications are pending for meat processors. The Alliance is also developing a specific certification for the American Grass Fed Association, which, according to Exo, believes the recent grass-fed labeling standards approved by USDA aren't strict enough.