Consumer interest in organic and other sustainably grown products continues to rise. Growers are changing farming practices to meet requirements of these market-driven programs. Many agricultural certification programs have rigorous standards that restrict pesticide and fertilizer use and may require producers to document multiple aspects of their operation such as pest management practices, fertilizer and water usage, recycling rates, and even greenhouse gas emissions. Adapting conventional production systems to comply with certification standards often poses significant challenges for producers. Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) who can tailor integrated pest management (IPM) recommendations and agronomic advice to local circumstances, especially those who understand the technical and financial support that the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide, are well positioned to help their clients adapt to the changing face of agriculture.

Many U.S. programs certify agricultural and forestry products, and the programs are diverse. Certification standards of the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) require producers to exhaust other pest management options before applying pesticides and prohibit the use of most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Biodynamic growers certified by Demeter USA must meet NOP standards while combining animal and plant production, applying certain soil and plant treatments, and correlating agricultural operations with natural cycles. The majority of certification programs, however, address some variant of a “3 Es” definition of sustainability: environmentally sound, socially equitable, and economically viable. Certification programs hire, train, and accredit auditors to verify grower compliance with program standards.

Role of consultants

Organic production and other sustainable practices are knowledge and management intensive, and certified growers can benefit from consultant expertise. Cliff Ohm-art, vice president of Professional Services for SureHarvest and board member of the certifier Protected Harvest,