You've heard this afternoon how sustainable agriculture is viewed and being acted on in the academic and industrial sectors. I intend to examine the Congressional attitudes and initiatives related to sustainable agriculture.

There is a great diversity of opinion on whether or not sustainable agriculture is a useful concept, and that reflects itself in a lack of consensus on the idea among Congressional agricultural policymakers. At a hearing on sustainable agriculture held by Rep. George Brown (D-CA) in July, it became evident that there are at least two schools of thought among members of the House Agriculture Committee, reflecting the divergent viewpoints among agriculturalists in general. One group views sustainable agriculture as being equated to organic agriculture, with no inputs of synthetic fertilizers, or chemicals, and thus they are wary of the concept. The other viewpoint, expressed by Rep. Brown and a few other members of the subcommittee, is that agricultural sustainability refers to economic profitability, environmental stewardship, and rural vitality.

More specifically, Rep. Brown stated "I would expect agricultural systems that are relatively more sustainable to have some of the following characteristics: the production systems should obviously provide sufficient agricultural products to meet human needs, but in a way which is not detrimental to human health; the system should minimize depletion of nonrenewable resources, in part by maximizing recycling of materials; the system should promote diversity, and in turn economic stability; the system should provide some strength to the rural sector; and finally, the system must obviously provide a profit for the participants in the system, considering both the short-term and long-term costs."

He said, "I would argue that U.S. agriculture is not now sustainable, given the billions of dollars we pour into agricultural subsidies, the environmental problems we face with soil erosion and water quality, and rural distress that continues to linger."

The first Congressional hearing on sustainable agriculture was held in 1982 by Rep. Brown, but there seems to have been little followup action by Congress until the Agricultural Productivity Act, a section of the 1985 Food Security Act. In the meantime, issues such as food safety, climate change, the cost of farm programs, pesticides in the environment, farm and the vitality of rural communities have been major items of discussion. Many of these issues are the focus of hearings or legislation, and agricultural sustainability in the broad sense of environmental, social, and economic criteria.

The upcoming 1990 "Farm Bill," because it is a legislative vehicle guaranteed to pass in some form, will pick up a wide variety of programs, including those oriented towards sustainable agriculture (every 4 to 5 years Congress does a major overhaul of national agricultural policy, known as the Farm Bill). The various sections of the Farm Bill are put together by subcommittees and Senate Agriculture Committees. For clues to the types of conservation and sustainable agriculture provisions likely to find their way into the Farm Bill...