

BRING GRASS TO LIFE™

U.S. SOD INDUSTRY CHECKOFF

SOD CHECKOFF SPOTLIGHT: THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY

By Erin Heidecker

Sustainability is increasingly being used as part of purchasing decisions by consumers. Emerging research shows that if consumers do not see your product as sustainable, they are much less likely to purchase it. Inversely, if they do so see your product as sustainable not only will they purchase it—but they are willing to pay more for it!

The artificial turf industry has put significant effort into communicating benefits of going artificial, like less time maintaining your lawn, decreased water usage, reduced chemicals, etc. and simply look at the price of it. It is substantially more expensive than natural grass.

What can our industry do to show that natural grass is in fact sustainable? And what can we do to increase the value of our products? The answer is simple, we just need to tell our story. The truth is that natural grass lawns and athletic fields do in fact have positive environmental contributions and can be a significant part of urban and suburban ecosystems now and in the future.

What can our industry do to show that natural grass is in fact sustainable?

And what can we do to increase the value of our products? The answer is simple, we just need to tell our story.

Partnering to Grow Market Share

There is no doubt that this can be made possible by partnering with a U.S. Sod Checkoff to build a sustainability story, backed by extensive research, so that consumers know the facts about natural grass.

One of our industry's competitors sees the value of checkoffs and is already doing this. Synthetic turf manufacturers are currently partnering with the United Soybean Board checkoff to grow their market share. Soy checkoff investments are supporting a wide range of artificial turf uses, including partnerships with sports complexes across the country. Shouldn't our industry be doing the same?

Synthetic turf manufacturers are also partnering with the USDA to promote their products, creating labels that can now claim these products contain a percentage of bio-based content. Having support from a larger entity like the USDA gives them both funding for consumer research, as well as budget to market to consumers in a way that is not being bolstered in the sod industry. What's more bio-based than natural grass? Again, shouldn't our industry be doing the same?

How Can the Checkoff Help Reach Consumers?

An industry-wide checkoff could fund research to better understand consumer thinking on sustainability and determine which benefits of natural grass to communicate through nationwide promotions. Having the power of research and promotion can help shift perspectives for future consumers, strengthen current markets and build new demand.

Research has shown consumer familiarity with the term "sustainability" has grown steadily in recent years, but confidence in identifying sustainable products and companies is lagging. Sustainability's importance as a purchase criterion has grown over time and, for millennials, it has become an everyday concern.

Consumers also look for connections and relationships between environmental and social issues. Some of these factors include biodiversity, soil health, carbon neutrality, plastic waste, and more than 25 others. These terms are in consumers' minds now, and our industry has a great story to tell about how natural grass fits into this complex web

BRING GRASS TO LIFE™

U.S. SOD INDUSTRY CHECKOFF

of sustainability and its impact on purchasing decisions. Research from The Hartman Group shows that the percentage of consumers who consistently purchased based on sustainability has increased 12 percentage points since 2007. Going even further, almost 50 percent of millennials in 2021 identify themselves as purchasing products based on sustainability.

"Sustainability is one of the first things I think about when shopping in store and online. It can be a little more expensive and some products are sparse in quantity at times, but it's completely worth it."

—Lancing, Millennial, The Hartman Group, Inc.
Sustainability 2021

Consumers Are Decision Makers Too

Let's also not forget that consumers are also decision makers who sit on city councils, athletic boards, school boards, etc. So, not only do they need to understand the benefits of natural grass in their own purchasing decisions, but they also have influence in building codes, model standards, public policy, etc. They need to understand the many environmental benefits that natural grass brings to home lawns, stormflow, urban heat islands, carbon capture, and more. Natural grass lawns, athletic fields, and public spaces provide important benefits in each of these areas that the public needs to know about.

Consumers increasingly care about reducing plastics, environmentally friendly farming methods, protecting soil health, and more. Natural grass sod producers play a key role in many of these factors.

Research from The Hartman Group shows that the percentage of consumers who consistently purchased based on sustainability has increased 12 percentage points since 2007. Going even further, almost 50 percent of millennials in 2021 identify themselves as purchasing products based on sustainability.

Telling Our Own Story

Telling our story is not just about pushing back against synthetic turf either. It is about increasing the awareness of natural grass and its many benefits, thereby increasing consumer's willingness to continue purchasing our products—and perhaps even paying more for them.

Sustainability research is nothing new, but the emergence of these trends in purchasing decisions, particularly around agricultural products, can impact everyone in our industry. Whether that impact is positive or negative may very well depend on us telling our own story instead of having someone else craft it for us.

Research and promotion can come together in a meaningful way with backing from a U.S. Sod Checkoff, helping to grow the industry for future generations.

Building promotions around research-supported ideas can have a powerful impact with today's consumers, building their confidence in a product, and helping them feel at ease when making large purchasing decisions. Research and promotion can come together in a meaningful way with backing from a U.S. Sod Checkoff, helping to grow the industry for future generations.

Erin Heidecker is senior manager, client success, with CLUTCH, an agriculture marketing and consulting firm that works with several commodity checkoffs.

