Sustainability has become the watchword of the wine and grape industry in the United States, and particularly in California. Winegrowers up and down the state are looking at how they do things, finding ways to lessen the environmental impact of their operations, becoming better stewards of the land—and justifiably letting the world know what they’re doing.

All this motion has generated multiple definitions of sustainability, several schools of thought, and a potpourri of checklist systems. And some heated debates: What exactly does “sustainable” mean? Who decides what qualifies? Is sustainability a hazy goal down the road, a good vibe, or something that can be measured objectively?

Here’s how Hope Family Wines sees—and practices—sustainability.

The Meaning of Sustainability

In broad terms, sustainable winegrowing means practices that keep vineyards healthy and productive over the long haul, minimizing negative environmental impacts, along with winery methods that conserve resources and reduce waste and pollution. But at the same time, sustainability for growers and wineries has to mean something else: staying in business, providing continued jobs and income for owners and employees, and in many cases, maintaining the family business as a career option for younger generations.

“For us,” says third-generation farmer and winemaker Austin Hope, “it’s almost a lifestyle—being a good steward to the land and to the people who live and work on it.” Steps toward improving sustainability have to do more than enhance a press release: they have to make the winery work better, too.

Until quite recently, “sustainable” had little definition—it was largely an aspiration, something everyone could claim to be committed to, regardless of how they farmed their vineyards. Now several organizations, in winegrowing and other areas of agriculture, are giving the term clear focus and concrete meaning.

One prominent effort on California’s Central Coast is the Sustainability in Practice (SIP) certification program launched two years ago by the Central Coast Vineyard Team. Growers who participate in SIP document their vineyard practices, from site establishment to water conservation to pest management, and have the information audited on-site by third-party reviewers. To qualify for the annual certification, growers have to score 75% or more of the possible points in the audit. 3,700 acres were certified on the Central Coast in 2008, and another 6,200 acres were submitted for certification in 2009.

Hope Family’s vineyards received SIP certification in September, 2009. “We looked at what we were doing,” says Austin, “and what the program called for, and realized we were pretty much there.” The Hope Family team is now encouraging other growers to check out the SIP process, too.

All the approaches to sustainability in wine growing have their advantages and disadvantages. Organic vineyard certification is a leading, high-visibility route, and it offers a clear way of avoiding the destructive impact of old-fashioned chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. On the other hand, organic farming can require more tractor passes in the vineyard, consuming fossil fuel and generating emissions, and adding to soil compaction.

In achieving sustainability, as in all of farming, nothing is simple. It comes down to a million small decisions.
Decisions, Decisions

When Austin and his team review the details of what goes on in the vineyards and winery, their main concerns are making better wine, making it more efficiently, and sometimes just making life easier for the staff. How to make the operation “greener” is only one of many things to consider. “There is no single hard and fast rule for deciding things,” says Austin, “except one: think before you act.”

Action gets taken only for a good reason. And more often than not, changing a method in order to save resources—time, energy, labor, water—not only helps the bottom line: it benefits the environment as well. Here are a few of the things Hope Family has done recently:

Instead of trying to kill everything but the vines, cover crops between rows—mixes of grasses, beans, and other native plants—attract beneficial insects, helping control potentially destructive insects with much less spraying. The cover crops get tilled back into the soil, providing nitrogen and other nutrients, reducing the need for chemical fertilizer. Net result: happier grapevines, fewer synthetic inputs to the vineyards.

For its several labels, Hope Family works with dozens of growers in Paso and around the state; their ranks have expanded as production has doubled in the past few years. Grower relations specialist Kristen Lane is in continual touch with these growers about what’s going on in their vineyards. Close working relations provide an opportunity to talk about water use (where reduced irrigation often yields higher quality grapes), spray programs (where less toxic alternatives keep coming onto the market), cover crops, and other aspects of winegrowing. Hope Family is gradually raising the bar on what it expects from its growers.

Harsh chemicals use in the winery has been reduced in recent years. Cleaning—something wineries do endlessly—relies on water pressure, steam, ozone, and other methods that leave minimal chemical residue behind. Since winery waste water is closely monitored, making it cleaner to begin with is good business.

Winemaking consumes as much as six to eight gallons of water for every gallon of wine produced, and water in Paso Robles is anything but plentiful. Cleaning, a major use, depends on water pressure, not the sheer volume of water. So when a new water piping system was put in, 3/4” pipe was chosen, not the usual full 1”, to intentionally limit usage. Which meant all the myriad ways water was employed had to be re-examined and tweaked—and so much the better. The result: a nearly 40% reduction in the water-per-gallon-of-wine ratio.

With summer temperatures often topping 100º around Paso, electricity is another big ticket expense, primarily for cooling tanks and wine storage areas. The Hope Family Wines facilities get much of their cooling almost for free, through a system of fans and vents that draw in cool night air—Paso temperatures drop sharply after dark—and blow out warm air. The fans use a fraction of the electricity air conditioning would consume. Winemaker Jason Diefenderfer put the system together with parts from a local hardware and garden store, including a lawn sprinkler timer and some simple temperature sensors. Reduced electrical needs means that Hope Family Wines can participate in the PG&E curtailment program, voluntarily cutting back their own power when statewide demand peaks.

There’s nothing particularly romantic or sexy about a lot of these steps toward sustainability. But they do the job, benefiting the winery and lessening pressure on the environment. “We’re happy to be getting greener,” says Austin, “and glad to have gotten the SIP certification. But we don’t do things just to seem “green,” or just because everyone else is doing them. We do things because they make sense.”