



## Steve Balling Del Monte

As people in agriculture focus on the future of their industry, they need to keep growers in the center of the equation, contends Steve Balling of Del Monte Foods.



“It starts by partnering with growers,” he told participants in the Western SARE California Subregional Conference in Visalia. “You cannot manage agriculture from the corporate boardroom. Nobody understands this better than the grower on the ground. Producers do the work. They understand the system. Nothing is accomplished without grower understanding, buy-in and support.”

Balling, director of Agricultural and Analytical Services for Del Monte, said he sees the future of agriculture as a blend of many inputs.

“We’re not going to reject anything,” he said. “Sustainability will require contributions from conventional, organic, biotech and traditional sources.”

He added that achieving sustainability may require “more of a revolution than an evolution.”

Balling raised challenges and opportunities he sees for agriculture by asking questions.

- What is the role of SARE and sustainable growers if you’re going to feed the world? How do you feed 12 million people in Los Angeles? How do you feed them with small and integrated farms?
- What can conventional agriculture learn from sustainable agriculture, and how can we blur the distinction?
- How do you build a better model for matching ag production and consumer needs? For example, 25% of what goes to grocery stores is wasted.
- How can growers link with other state and federal programs that will drive innovation?
- Who will be our future farmers? The average age of farmers continues to rise.

- How do we reverse the trend of an eroding infrastructure? All of the things that made agriculture great, we are losing.
- How do we measure our success along the journey? We don't do a good job of measuring what we've done, measuring whether we're succeeding.
- When you tweak the system, what are the impacts?
- How do we derail "The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio?" a reference to the title of a book published in 1998. I don't want the production of our food to go to China, but it will if we don't do a better job of being competitive.

Balling noted that his own company, Del Monte, strives for sustainability in a number of areas, including distributing its products responsibly, decreasing the impacts of packaging, reducing its facilities footprints and partnering with growers.

(View a summary of Balling's key [presentation points](#) and [video](#) of his presentation.)