Frontier Coop: Well Earth Program (Scalability and Sustainability)

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1. Project Objectives

MIT Sloan Sustainability Lab students were engaged to work with Frontier Natural Products Coop on the improvement and scaling of its “Well Earth” purchasing program. The team was charged with strategizing the growth of its current portfolio of six producers to over 80% of its producers over the course of the next 5 years, with a more effective qualification process. At the time of the engagement Well Earth was an internal initiative developed by Frontier to find and develop ethical sources of spice and essential oils. Frontier currently purchases over $65mm of spice and essential oils annually from over 50 countries throughout the world. While it maintains high ethical and sustainable practices in all of its decisions, Frontier’s creation of the Well Earth program was its first attempt to develop a cohesive strategy that embodies this ethos.

Frontier’s goal as a company is to become the best organic food company in the world. The company envisions achieving this through its commitment to long-term sustainable growth: socially, environmentally, and financially. As the leading producer of natural spices, Frontier has been looking for a way to extend its vision of ethical business. More specifically, it developed the Well Earth program to address the shortfalls Frontier saw in existing certification programs, and to do so in way that would contribute to its ability to source the highest quality product while strengthening the environment and society.

Traditionally, Frontier has sourced products from family farms throughout the world. Through ‘Well Earth’, it has worked to provide technical and financial assistance in the form of grants and loans. As it begins the process of scaling this program,
Frontier has recognized that it needs to perform a comprehensive review of the ‘Well Earth’ program, its long-term objectives, and the current tools it has developed in order to achieve this.

Frontier requested the MIT Sloan team to assist in strengthening the ‘Well Earth’ program in the following areas:

1) Clarify the goals of Frontier’s ‘Well Earth’ program, specifically in addressing any points of differentiation from the many other similar programs in the market, and in doing so, evaluate how Frontier is currently assisting producers in developing countries in achieving ‘Well Earth’ status.

2) Create a roadmap to assist in the scaling of the ‘Well Earth’ program at both the producer level and within Frontier itself so as to create a more robust and scalable purchasing program that will allow Frontier to achieve its social and operational objectives.

3) Assist Frontier in better marketing its ‘Well Earth’ program at both the consumer and producer level. Specifically, with all of the certification programs available, i.e. Fair Trade, Organic, Frontier was looking to explore ways by which it could differentiate its program from certification-oriented programs.
2. Background & Analysis

2.1 Frontier

Frontier Natural Products Coop was established in 1976 as a cooperative, and is currently the market leader in natural and organic product supply, especially spices. Its products can be found in stores such as Whole Foods. A few key facts about Frontier:

- Has annual revenue of over $65M
- Purchases over $40mm in spices annually from 50 developing countries
- Is owned by its wholesale customers.

Frontier prides itself in core values related to product quality and social/environmental sustainability. From a product quality standpoint, this means having the best-quality organic products available as well as ensuring seasonal and lot-to-lot consistency in supply within the same commodity. From a social/environmental sustainability standpoint, Frontier seeks to foster and market its commitment to fair trade with vendors and programs that support and enhance the local communities, and engage in production practices that don’t compromise the environment.

2.2 Well Earth Program

Frontier established the Well Earth program in 2005 as an in-house certification process, to proactively find and develop socially and environmentally responsible suppliers. Frontier expects this will ultimately lead to better quality and surety of supply for Frontier, along with the ability to market its suppliers’ story to connect with customers. Frontier highlighted during our interviews that addressing quality at the source (with the farmers) is especially critical for organics where options for treatment are very limited.
The Well Earth program seeks to apply Frontier’s values through providing stable, long-term contracts, technical assistance, and financial support to the vendors (and their communities) that are dedicated to being ethical and sustainable producers.

Benefits to a Well Earth vendor include:

- Stability of revenue through the development of long-term contracts with Frontier over multiple seasons, while in the process becoming better suppliers for Frontier
- Education and development of farmers through Frontier’s assistance of ~1% of pre-tax profits
- Support of local community initiatives such as schools and food assistance programs through Frontier’s contribution of ~4% of pre-tax profits

Of the hundreds of vendors through which Frontier sources its products, currently 5-6 are Well-Earth Certified; however, this actually represents upwards of 10% of Frontier’s total purchase volume. In selecting potential Well Earth vendors, the purchasing team focuses on its most high-volume commodities such as cinnamon and black pepper to ensure Well Earth has the broadest impact. The qualities the program looks for in its certified suppliers encompass areas of fair labor, sustainable organic farming practices, environmental/natural resource protection, community development, and safety/quality of products.

2.3 Current Well Earth Certification Process

The current process for the establishment of Well Earth partnership is as follows:
1) During the sourcing process for new vendors, the Purchasing department engages in discussions with potential vendors without any mention of Well Earth. This serves
as a filtering process by allowing vendors to present their own self-image, so it will be a positive signal if they independently raise issues of sustainability and social equity.

2) During/after the vetting process which typically includes one onsite visit, Frontier asks the vendor if they are willing to be considered for the Well Earth program. With an affirmative reply, Frontier begins the certification process.

3) The first step toward certification is for the supplier to complete an extensive questionnaire that gathers information on the supplier's practices in areas of labor, environment, etc (see Appendix for questionnaire).

4) The lead Frontier Purchasing contact will inspect the vendor using the questionnaire criteria and will document all outages. Data collection includes speaking with the supplier’s chief position, observation of farming practices, collection of wage reports, talking to farmers through a translator to get their perspective, taking pictures of the facilities and notes, and sample collection.

5) The Purchaser shares information gathered with the Frontier Well Earth approval committee and compiles any follow up questions.

6) The Purchaser follows up with the vendor on the committee’s follow-ups, which may involve an additional visit, and then the approval committee makes the final decision. The overall process can take as long as eight months to a year to complete.
2.4 SWOT Analysis:

Though our analysis is focused on the scaling and expansion of the Well Earth program, a more general strategic analysis of the program as a whole helps to shed light on some of the issues and opportunities facing Frontier. This analysis outlines the current state of the program (strengths and weaknesses) as well as potential future states (opportunities, threats) given the current trajectory of the Well Earth program.

**Strengths**

The current Well Earth program has several characteristics which should be considered strengths. First, Well Earth has adopted a comprehensive scope. By recognizing the social, environmental and economic impacts of its relationships, Frontier has placed Well Earth ahead of many other certification programs currently being adopted.

The Well Earth program enjoys several benefits from being an in-house strategy. By keeping the program in-house, Frontier has avoided the complexity of integration with third party organizations. This straightforward approach allows Frontier the flexibility to change the Well Earth program as necessary in a quickly evolving landscape of certifiers and sustainable business practices.

Finally, the Well Earth program offers some technical assistance and grants for its partners. As will be discussed later, these programs are a critical component of fostering productive, long-term relationship with suppliers.
Weaknesses

The Well Earth program suffers from a number of weaknesses which limit its current effectiveness. First, the Well Earth program is relatively redundant with many other well known 3rd party certification programs. This redundancy creates considerable incremental workload for those vendors attempting to receive these certifications, while also simultaneously diluting the recognition of the Well Earth brand.

Further, the administration of the Well Earth program relies heavily on Frontier staff and expertise. While the staff of Frontier has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the mission, effective management of such a comprehensive certification program is very resource intensive. With only one (or a few) dedicated resources to the management and expansion of the Well Earth qualification process, Frontier’s capacity to enact all the prongs of Well Earth is limited. For example, during the due diligence process to verify key information obtained directly from the vendors, Frontier staff speaks with the farmers of the product about their experience working with the vendor. However, there are inherent biases since the vendor can hand-selects which farmers Frontier speaks with. In addition, when English is not the primary language spoken, Frontier must rely on the accuracy and intentions of the vendor’s translator to adequately communicate the farmer’s points.

Finally, the current Well Earth qualification process employs a compliance-based approach to process monitoring and development. This compliance-based approach creates incentives for suppliers to cheat the system and degrades the reliability of the certification program.
**Opportunities**

Looking forward, the Well Earth program could capitalize on two key opportunities given its current structure. First, the close relationships forged with suppliers through the Well Earth program today could give Frontier a valuable source of effective marketing material in the form of individual stories, community successes and inspiring anecdotes.

Well Earth could also utilize its close relationships, technical assistance programs and grants to strengthen suppliers to the standards of 3rd party certifiers. This would improve the credibility of the Well Earth/ Frontier brands and provide suppliers better access to markets.

**Threats**

As the Well Earth program scales, several potential issues could be potentially troublesome. First, because of the credibility issues identified with the current certification process, Frontier may be subject to accusations of ‘green washing’ by competitors, third party organizations and consumers. Such accusations would certainly be detrimental to the Frontier/Well Earth brands.

More imminently, the current scaling goals of the Well Earth program will require enormous resource commitments from Frontier in the form of personnel, time and money. This will require significant deployment of capital and a re-evaluation of how ‘Well Earth’ fits into primary mission of Frontier Coop.
3. Research results

To better evaluate the Well Earth program and recommend strategies for growth and expansion, we undertook benchmarking and research analysis in two key areas: monitoring programs and scaling and expansion practices.

3.1 Best practices in Monitoring Programs:

The key finding of our research into voluntary regulation was the concept of compliance versus commitment based monitoring.\(^1\)

Compliance based regulation is the most common method for ensuring specific labor standards, environmental practices and legal compliance in private organizations today. This method relies on traditional “checklist” style audits, fines for non-compliance and threats of ending trade in order to coerce suppliers to obey specific standards. “Compliance with regulation is the result of a cost-benefit analysis in which firms give up violating the law when the probability of being caught (surveillance) and the cost-of-punishment (fines) is higher than the benefits of non-compliance.”\(^2\) However, these traditional systems are rarely effective. Studies of compliance based monitoring systems demonstrate that two specific outcomes are most common. First, the inspections and audits are not able to enforce standards consistently due to unreliable information, lack of monitoring resources and cheating amongst suppliers (providing

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\(^1\) “Virtue out of Necessity?: Compliance, Commitment and the Improvement of Labor Conditions in Global Supply Chains” Richard Locke, Matthew Amengual, Akshay Mangla.

false records, selective site inspections, bias interview subjects, etc.). In the second case, when inspectors have sufficient resources for comprehensive and reliable audits, factories are forced to meet standards, but at the expense of cost competitiveness.³

Instead, research suggests the best method for regulating independent organizations involves a commitment based partnership focused on improvement. A contrast of these two styles of regulation can be found in Appendix 1. The commitment based approach takes the following steps:

1) Firms open themselves up for change
2) Inspectors learn about the obstacles inhibiting firms' compliance
3) Inspectors identify - or support the development of - such legal and/or technological solutions as may be needed to reconcile compliance with economic efficiency.⁴

Note that suppliers are not punished for violations at the start of the process. Instead, the regulating organizations must first develop good will with their partners to allow for accurate assessment. This suggests personal interaction and collaborative goal setting are important. Since commitment based relationships are more open, regulating organizations often receive more credible reporting and experience less of the “dog and pony show”. Once opportunities are accurately identified, the regulating organization invests in their partners with knowledge sharing and financial assistance for capability improvement. In similar industries and geographic areas, many suppliers experience the same technical and managerial obstacles to compliance. Hence,


monitoring organizations can leverage innovations and strategies for improvement across their supplier base.

Commitment based engagement is a more effective method for improving compliance and speeding development among suppliers in developing countries. Though compliance based monitoring is the norm among multi-nationals, governments and third party organizations across the globe, research suggests that the implementation of these methods is difficult and the outcomes are mixed.

For further information, refer to “Virtue out of Necessity? Compliance, Commitment and the Improvements of Labor Conditions in Global Supply Chains” (Locke, Amengual, Mangla) which provides a detailed analysis of these regulatory models and their effectiveness. “Promoting sustainable compliance…”, by Roberto Pires is another useful source. This article compares the results of compliance and commitment based approaches across several Brazilian industries.

3.2 Best practices for scaling and expansion:

One of the criteria for Frontier’s ‘Well Earth’ program is that it should be scalable across several countries. In order to do this Frontier would need to create a robust enough back-end system within Frontier so as to allow ‘Well Earth’ to grow with its producers. The notion of scaling needs to apply to both Frontier’s ability to partner with as many of its producers as possible, and in its ability to manage that process as effectively as possible.

At the producer level, scalability applies to both the relationship between Frontier and the supplier, and to the transfer of information between suppliers. At the corporate level scalability relates to the company’s ability to address producers’ problems at each
stage of the producer’s development as an enterprise. As a producer grows and develops so should Frontier’s ability to assist.

To that end, several handicraft cooperatives and cottage industry associations have done an excellent job of developing assistance programs that facilitate growth at both the producer level as well as at the corporate level.

‘Aid To Artisans’ (www.aidtoartisans.org), an international non-governmental organization that works with small artisan developers in developing nations, has created a scalable platform that allows it to work with artisans at several points along the value chain. It has done this primarily by building out expertise internally and through the assistance of outside consultants that it can contract through. It has also created a series of workshops and training programs that allows it to work with artisans at both the production and operations level.

Aid To Artisans has also focused on communication between artisans as a means of strengthening producers. In the past it has done through hosting communal picnics, conferences and through a newsletter that is filled with pictures and ideas. This has allowed the organization to create a sense of community. By creating a linkage between handicraft producers in Kenya and in Vietnam, Aid To Artisans has been able to strengthen its relationship with producers in both locations.
4. Recommendations

An evaluation of Frontier’s goals relative to its current process as well as the best practices has informed our recommendations to strengthen and scale the Well Earth program. Below are our key recommendations:

**Clearly define goals and mission of the Well Earth Program**

The Well Earth Program is a significant asset and showpiece for Frontier Coop. The stories and images of successful partnerships between suppliers and Frontier add personality and illustration to the Frontier brand and the cooperative’s values of environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

The Well Earth suppliers also benefit from the program due to a more committed buyer/supplier relationship with Frontier. The grant money used to train farmers, feed children in India, or pay workers good wages for top quality biodynamic vanilla beans is certainly meaningful to the groups that Well Earth participates with.

According to the 2007 Frontier Sustainability Report and the 2008 Social Responsibility Update, the goal for Well Earth is to have 15 participating organizations or farms by the end of 2009. In addition to this definitive goal for total number of suppliers, we feel it will be valuable for Frontier to specify further goals for the Well Earth program to be a sustainable benefit to Frontier and its partners.

Goals could include:

- Certify Well Earth suppliers for all the major categories Frontier purchases. This might include suppliers of botanicals in countries other than India and in categories such as cinnamon, tea, and botanicals for the body care line.
• The Aura Cacia line might be a good opportunity for adding a Well Earth Certified supplier because the existing suppliers might be able to certify as Well Earth even though as indicated in the 2007 Frontier Coop Sustainability Report, it is difficult to have them qualify under organic standards.

• Include benchmarks of community improvement for the Well Earth Partners. This could include elements, such as, contributions to local sustainable development projects and increasing employment opportunities in their local areas. This may already be something the partners are engaged in, but stating it as a goal will help to emphasize the social responsibility component of Well Earth.

• Increase the number of stories and “photo documentaries” available on the Well Earth website. These stories help customers relate to Frontier and its initiatives and demonstrate commitment from Frontier to promoting positive relationships with its suppliers. The stories and photos also serve as a form of marketing which is impossible to replicate because of its qualitative, unique format.

• Seek credibility with groups that evaluate sustainability certification programs. The Eco-Labels program of Consumer Reports is an example of a meta-analysis of various US and international sustainability labels. Well Earth is not currently included in the list. If it were, more consumers, suppliers, and potential future partners would find Frontier Coop and the Well Earth Program.
Implement a two-tier strategy to strengthen and scale Well Earth

In order to achieve the above described goals, we recommend that Frontier adopt a two-tier strategy to expand its supplier base engaged with Well-Earth and create a platform for collaboration and growth of its suppliers towards a Well-Earth partnership. It is imperative that the supplier relationships that define the Well-Earth program be based on commitment rather than compliance to ensure quality and sustainability of the relationships.

As noted in the research analysis, qualification processes that rely on monitoring tools elicit short-term compliance and rarely form a basis for credible and trusted relationships that are so crucial for social and environmentally responsible efforts. Therefore, collaboration and commitment should be the key driver used to advocate and facilitate the levels of engagement proposed below.

Tier I: Well Earth Engaged:

One of the key challenges identified by Frontier is the ability to source and lock in suppliers that entirely meet Well Earth’s current criteria for sustainability—both environmental and social. Typically, the farmers and/or associations that Frontier works with lie on a spectrum of alignment with Well Earth defined metrics.

We recommend that Frontier engage potential Well Earth certified farmers through an assessment of their current and enrolling vendors. This baseline program would involve, in the short-term, an evaluation of the vendors through the improved self-assessment questionnaire.
The initial assessment provides frontier with an understanding of the capabilities of its current and potential vendors as Well Earth participants. It would enable Frontier to identify the gaps and opportunities for intervention to develop high-potential suppliers towards Well Earth certifications. At this stage, Frontier could enter into short-term contracts and commit to identifying high-potential suppliers.

Tier II: Well Earth Partner:

The mission of Well Earth to create reliable, sustainable and committed partnerships with suppliers underscores the need for trust, collaboration and credibility with the suppliers and communication of this ethos to the customers. We envision the Well Earth farmers and/or communities to be partners in this initiative. Well Earth Partners are suppliers that are part of the Engagement stage and based on their commitment and potential for growth are supported through community and technical assistance grants to develop to the partnership stage.

Well Earth partnerships could be long-term purchasing agreements that allow Frontier to mitigate the risks in supply cycles. These should be supported and maintained through collaboration with third-party organizations such as NGO’s working with communities of farmers. Well-Earth Partnerships embody Frontier’s vision of socially and environmentally responsible supplier relationships. These partnerships should be the source of the anecdotes and stories that reflect Frontier’s branding and form the basis of the marketing efforts.

As noted, while the self-assessment questionnaire would help leverage the current process in place, we recommend that the qualification process for Well Earth suppliers evolve to using a more comprehensive approach to assessing potential
partners. Cognizant of Well Earth’s criteria, we recommend that a new tool similar to the “Food-Alliance” questionnaire be developed to facilitate identifying suppliers along the value-chain of alignment with Well-Earth’s mission.

Frontier could adopt a phased approach to revising and scaling its qualification process for identification and collaboration with potential Well Earth suppliers. In the initial phase, Frontier could work with a revised questionnaire that farmers and/or vendors can complete to self-assess their alignment with Well Earth’s criteria. As Frontier develops the second tier of partnerships, the new tool could be used as the single point of assessment for all of its suppliers.

One of the key advantages of an assessment tool such as this would be to identify opportunities for development for those suppliers that rate very high on the Well Earth criteria. Frontier could use their current community and technical assistance grants much more strategically as avenues to developing the baseline suppliers towards becoming Well Earth partners.

**Well Earth Fund (Community Development and Technical assistance grants)**

We recommend the creation of a Well Earth Fund whose mission is to provide development and technical assistance grants to high-potential suppliers identified in the Well Earth Engaged stage to help them graduate to Well Earth Partners. The fund could be administered in collaboration with NGOs or local partnerships that will facilitate commitment and credibility in the supplier-Frontier relationships. The fund could be grown in part by redirecting the funds that currently support community programs such as school donations. Contributions to school, while beneficial to the community, are not aligned with Frontier’s business strategy. By comparison, the technical assistance
grants will directly benefit both the farmers and Frontier’s bottom line, which will enable Frontier to incorporate even more Well Earth partners.

These grants when offered as strategic interventions help create long-term, trusted and reliable relationships that will allow Frontier to replicate, scale and communicate these stories to further expand their program. We recommend that Frontier invest in high-potential suppliers through these grants as well through fair purchasing agreements that will incentivize the farmers to stay the course of the partnership.

Below is a depiction of the proposed two-tier strategy for expanding and scaling the Well-Earth program:

Figure 1: Proposed Well Earth two tier strategy
**Improvements to Well Earth Questionnaire**

In the long term, we recommend that Frontier evolve to using a more comprehensive tool for the qualification process. In the interim, we have identified areas for improvement in the current questionnaire. The Well Earth questionnaire is currently strong in several ways. It is well organized, and allows plenty of room for the suppliers to write specific details on how they manage their operations. The opportunity to gain credit for innovation is also a benefit to the program. The Well Earth Questionnaire is organized into five areas or Standards: Worker Safety and Fair Treatment; Sustainable Growing/Production Practices; Environmental Impact; Social and Community Impact; and Food Safety and Quality.

Proposed improvements include:

- Strategies to make the evaluation feasible for non-native English speakers to adequately complete
  - Look to examples such as the US centered Food Alliance certification program for converting the questionnaire into more of a checklist.
  - Consider having the questionnaire or a ‘first tier’ version of the questionnaire translated into the languages of the community you are looking to partner with.
- Clear point system to streamline certification on the supplier and Frontier’s ends
  - Current questionnaire does not indicate which criteria are most important
  - A point system will also allow suppliers to more easily target the areas that they are in the best position to improve.
By combining a self-assessment and a points system, suppliers will be able to determine whether they are likely to meet the standards.

If suppliers discover that they do not meet the standards, suggestions can be given for resources to help make informed improvement.

Use the existing model for section 2, Sustainable Growing Practices, expand that principle to other certifications such as fair trade, biodynamic, or food alliance.

This practice could work two ways:

- If an organization is already Fair Trade Certified, then they could skip a section on worker rights which mirrors the Fair Trade qualifications.
- On the other hand, if an organization is not currently Fair Trade certified, but obtains a certain point level on the Well Earth certification, Well Earth might be able to recommend to them that they would qualify for that certification as well.

Increase the number of quantifiable, verifiable, or binary questions

- Currently, many of the Well Earth questions call for descriptions. These suggestions will improve ease of self-assessment for non-native speakers.
- Starting each Standard with the “check off” questions that will be easy to answer would save time and also potentially reduce frustration.
- Offering questions in the form of scale 1-10, true/false, and multiple choice might help to streamline completing the survey. An added benefit is that an increased number of numeric questions will be easier to tabulate, track improvements in, and process.
5. Conclusion

Overall, Frontier’s launch of Well Earth has built a strong start toward enhancing Frontier’s relationship with suppliers and contributing to the development of suppliers’ farmers and communities. A focus on social and environmental sustainability will ultimately fit well with Frontier’s business objectives and customer base. However, Frontier will need to strengthen the Well Earth program to bring better results both to Frontier’s bottom line and also to the farmers’ long term success and vitality. Our team’s recommendations to Frontier include:

1) Developing clear goals for Well Earth by better aligning the elements the Well Earth program with Frontier’s business objectives.

2) Implement a two-tiered qualification program that focuses on partnering with the supplier to work toward 3rd party recognized certification, which will include technical assistance and partnership with NGOs on the ground. Progress will be evaluated in a compliance-based approach against the Well Earth questionnaire.

3) Improve the current Well Earth questionnaire to be more straightforward to fill out, while eliminating aspects that are redundant, do not contribute to Frontier’s goals, or are too difficult to measure.

By implementing these recommendations, the Well Earth program will advance Frontier’s ability to source high quality, consistent supply while improving the livelihood of its suppliers.
## 1- Comparison of the Compliance vs. Commitment Approach

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<td>Rules/Standards Focus</td>
<td>Uncovering, Analyzing and Correcting “Root Causes” of Current Issues</td>
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<td>Joint Problem Solving, Information Sharing, Trust, Reciprocity</td>
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<td>Learning, Capacity-Building, (Positive) Incentives, Mutual Respect</td>
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