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Introduction

Since 1994, when the first edition of this *Special Reference Brief* was compiled, "sustainability" has become a more familiar term. The goal of achieving a sustainable planet, one that will accommodate the basic needs of its present inhabitants while preserving the resources that will enable future generations to flourish, has gained increasing acceptance. Although certainly not mainstream at this point, sustainable agriculture is now being addressed by the agricultural community in significant ways. The mid- to late-nineties have seen:

- Acceptance of Biodiversity and Climate Change Conventions as international law, ratified by over 120 countries (1992-1999)
- Establishment of the U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development and its Task Force on Sustainable Agriculture (1993)
- Presentation for comment and unprecedented consumer response to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Proposed Standards for Organic Food Production (1997-1998)
- Enactment of the U.S. Food Quality Protection Act (1997)
- Celebration of 10 successful years of USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program (1998)

In 1996, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Daniel Glickman issued a Memorandum on USDA sustainable agriculture policy. It stated, "USDA is committed to working toward the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of diverse food, fiber, agriculture, forest, and range systems. USDA will balance goals of improved production and profitability, stewardship of the natural resource base and ecological systems, and enhancement of the vitality of rural communities. USDA will integrate these goals into its policies and programs, particularly through interagency collaboration, partnerships and outreach." [Secretary's Memorandum 9500-6: Sustainable Development (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Sept. 13, 1996)]

If advocating the need for a sustainable agriculture has become universal, agreement as to what is required to achieve it has not. As more parties sign on to the sustainable agriculture effort, perceptions about what defines sustainability in agriculture have multiplied. This paper strives to illustrate the commonality and some of the controversy that defining such a goal entails, and it includes brief descriptions of the methodologies and practices currently associated with sustainable agriculture.

The author wishes to acknowledge the special contributions to this paper made by Jayne McLean and Jane Potter Gates, former Coordinators of the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC); Bill Thomas, its present Coordinator; Andy Clark, Coordinator of the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN); and Kirsten Saylor, SAN Program Assistant. Special thanks go to Rebecca Thompson for proofreading and HTML conversion.

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Sustainable Agriculture: The Basics

Some terms defy definition. "Sustainable agriculture" has become one of them. In such a quickly changing world, can anything be sustainable? What do we want to sustain? How can we implement such a nebulous goal? Is it too late? With the contradictions and questions have come a hard look at our present food production system and thoughtful evaluations of its future. If nothing else, the term "sustainable agriculture" has provided "talking points," a sense

of direction, and an urgency, that has sparked much excitement and innovative thinking in the agricultural world.

The word "sustain," from the Latin sustinere (sus-, from below and tenere, to hold), to keep in existence or maintain, implies long-term support or permanence. As it pertains to agriculture, sustainable describes farming systems that are "capable of maintaining their productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely. Such systems... must be resource-conserving, socially supportive, commercially competitive, and environmentally sound." [John Ikerd, as quoted by Richard Duesterhaus in "Sustainability's Promise," *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* (Jan.-Feb. 1990) 45(1): p.4. NAL Call # 56.8 J822]

"Sustainable agriculture" was addressed by Congress in the 1990 "Farm Bill" [Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 (FACTA), Public Law 101-624, Title XVI, Subtitle A, Section 1603 (Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1990) NAL Call # KF1692.A31 1990]. Under that law, "the term sustainable agriculture means an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term:

- satisfy human food and fiber needs;
- enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends;
- make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls;
- sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and
- enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole."

[Subchapter I: Findings, Purposes, and Definitions, U.S. Code, Title 7, Chapter 64-Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching, Available at GPO Access: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/

getdoc.cgi?dbname=browse_usc&docid=Cite:+7USC3103 (8/23/07)]

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Some Background

How have we come to reconsider our food and fiber production in terms of sustainability? What are the ecological, economic, social and philosophical issues that sustainable agriculture addresses?

The long-term viability of our current food production system is being questioned for many reasons. The news media regularly present us with the paradox of starvation amidst plenty—including pictures of hungry children juxtaposed with supermarket ads. Possible adverse environmental impacts of agriculture and increased incidence of foodborne illness also demand our attention. "Farm crises" seem to recur with regularity.

The prevailing agricultural system, variously called "conventional farming," "modern agriculture," or "industrial farming" has delivered tremendous gains in productivity and efficiency. Food production worldwide has risen in the past 50 years; the World Bank estimates that between 70 percent and 90 percent of the recent increases in food production are the result of conventional agriculture rather than greater acreage under cultivation. U.S. consumers have come to expect abundant and inexpensive food.

Conventional farming systems vary from farm to farm and from country to country. However, they share many characteristics: rapid technological innovation; large capital investments in order to apply production and management technology; large-scale farms; single crops/row crops grown continuously over many seasons; uniform high-yield hybrid crops; extensive use of pesticides, fertilizers, and external energy inputs; high labor efficiency; and dependency on agribusiness. In the case of livestock, most production comes from confined, concentrated systems.

Philosophical underpinnings of industrial agriculture include assumptions that "a) nature is a competitor to be overcome; b) progress requires unending evolution of larger farms and depopulation of farm communities; c) progress is measured primarily by increased material consumption; d) efficiency is measured by looking at the bottom line; and e) science is an unbiased enterprise driven by natural forces to produce social good." [Karl N. Stauber et al., "The Promise of Sustainable Agriculture," in *Planting the Future: Developing an Agriculture that Sustains Land and Community*, Elizabeth Ann R. Bird, Gordon L. Bultena, and John C. Gardner, editors (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995), p.13. NAL Call # S441 P58 1995]

Significant negative consequences have come with the bounty associated with industrial farming. Concerns about contemporary agriculture are presented below. They are drawn from the resources compiled at the end of this chapter. While considering these concerns, keep the following in mind: a) interactions between farming systems and soil, water, biota, and atmosphere are complex—we have much to learn about their dynamics and long term impacts; b) most environmental problems are intertwined with economic, social, and political forces external to agriculture; c) some problems are global in scope while others are experienced only locally; d) many of these problems are being addressed through conventional, as well as alternative, agricultural channels; e) the list is not complete; and f) no order of importance is intended.

Ecological Concerns

Agriculture profoundly affects many ecological systems. Negative effects of current practices include the following:

- Decline in soil productivity can be due to wind and water erosion of exposed topsoil; soil
 compaction; loss of soil organic matter, water holding capacity, and biological activity;
 and salinization of soils and irrigation water in irrigated farming areas. Desertification
 due to overgrazing is a growing problem, especially in parts of Africa.
- Agriculture is the largest single non-point source of water pollutants including sediments, salts, fertilizers (nitrates and phosphorus), pesticides, and manures. Pesticides from every chemical class have been detected in groundwater and are commonly found in groundwater beneath agricultural areas; they are widespread in the nation's surface waters. Eutrophication and "dead zones" due to nutrient runoff affect many rivers, lakes,

- and oceans. Reduced water quality impacts agricultural production, drinking water supplies, and fishery production.
- Water scarcity in many places is due to overuse of surface and ground water for irrigation with little concern for the natural cycle that maintains stable water availability.
- Other environmental ills include over 400 insects and mite pests and more than 70 fungal pathogens that have become resistant to one or more pesticides; stresses on pollinator and other beneficial species through pesticide use; loss of wetlands and wildlife habitat; and reduced genetic diversity due to reliance on genetic uniformity in most crops and livestock breeds.
- Agriculture's link to global climate change is just beginning to be appreciated.
 Destruction of tropical forests and other native vegetation for agricultural production has a role in elevated levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Recent studies have found that soils may be sources or sinks for greenhouse gases.

Economic and Social Concerns

Economic and social problems associated with agriculture can not be separated from external economic and social pressures. As barriers to a sustainable and equitable food supply system, however, the problems may be described in the following way:

- Economically, the U.S. agricultural sector includes a history of increasingly large federal
 expenditures and corresponding government involvement in planting and investment
 decisions; widening disparity among farmer incomes; and escalating concentration of
 agribusiness—industries involved with manufacture, processing, and distribution of farm
 products—into fewer and fewer hands. Market competition is limited. Farmers have little
 control over farm prices, and they continue to receive a smaller and smaller portion of
 consumer dollars spent on agricultural products.
- Economic pressures have led to a tremendous loss of farms, particularly small farms, and farmers during the past few decades—more than 155,000 farms were lost from 1987 to 1997. This contributes to the disintegration of rural communities and localized marketing systems. Economically, it is very difficult for potential farmers to enter the business today. Productive farmland also has been pressured by urban and suburban sprawl—since 1970, over 30 million acres have been lost to development.

Impacts on Human Health

Potential health hazards are tied to sub-therapeutic use of antibiotics in animal production, and pesticide and nitrate contamination of water and food. Farm workers are poisoned in fields, toxic residues are found on foods, and certain human and animal diseases have developed resistance to currently used antibiotics.

Philosophical Considerations

Historically, farming played an important role in our development and identity as a nation. From strongly agrarian roots, we have evolved into a culture with few farmers. Less than two percent of Americans now produce food for all U.S. citizens. Can sustainable and equitable food production be established when most consumers have so little connection to the natural processes that produce their food? What intrinsically American values have changed and will change with the decline of rural life and farmland ownership?

World population continues to grow. According to recent United Nations population projections, the world population will grow from 5.7 billion in 1995 to 9.4 billion in 2050, 10.4 billion in 2100, and 10.8 billion by 2150, and will stabilize at slightly under 11 billion around 2200. The rate of population increase is especially high in many developing countries. In these countries, the population factor, combined with rapid industrialization, poverty, political instability, and large food imports and debt burden, make long-term food security especially urgent.

Finally, the challenge of defining and dealing with the problems associated with today's food production system is inherently laden with controversy and emotion. "It is unfortunate, but true, that many in the agriculture community view sustainable agriculture as a personal criticism, or an attack, on conventional agriculture of which they are justifiably proud. <I guess that the main thing people get defensive about when you say sustainable,' explained one agent, 'is that it implies that what they've been doing is not sustainable. And that's the biggest issue." [Judy Green, "Sustainable Agriculture: Why Green Ideas Raise a Red Flag," Farming Alternatives Newsletter (Cornell) (Summer 1993).

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Margaret Reeves and Kristin Schafer, *Fields of Poison: California Farmworkers and Pesticides* (Pesticide Action Network, 1998?). Executive Summary. Available at: http://www.panna.org/resources/documents/fieldsSum.dv.html (8/23/07).

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A Sampling of Perspectives

"It's easy to understand why key individuals and organizations in agriculture have flocked to this term. After all, who would advocate a 'non-sustainable agriculture?" [Charles A. Francis, "Sustainable Agriculture: Myths and Realities," *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* (1990) 1(1): p.97. NAL Call # S494.5.S86S8] Despite the appeal of a sustainable agriculture philosophy, however, discussions about how best to define and achieve sustainability present some controversy. Supporters of sustainable agriculture come from diverse backgrounds, academic disciplines, and farming practices. Their convictions as to what elements are acceptable or not acceptable in a sustainable farming system sometimes conflict. They also disagree on whether sustainable agriculture needs defining at all.

"Wes Jackson, geneticist and co-founder of the Land Institute, was probably the first to use the term 'sustainable agriculture' in recent times (Jackson, 1978) ["Toward a Sustainable Agriculture," *Not Man Apart*, p. 4-6. Friends of the Earth, 1978]. Since natural ecosystems have stood the test of time, Jackson argued, they should serve as models for sustainable agriculture." [Greg McIsaac, *Sustainable Ag. Definition* (SANET-mg post, March 1994). Available at SANET-mg Archives Website: http://www.sare.org/sanet-mg/archives/html-home/4-html/0101.html (8/23/07)]

"Sustainable agriculture is a philosophy based on human goals and on understanding the long-term impact of our activities on the environment and on other species. Use of this philosophy guides our application of prior experience and the latest scientific advances to create integrated, resource-conserving, equitable farming systems. These systems reduce environmental degradation, maintain agricultural productivity, promote economic viability in both the short and long term, and maintain stable rural communities and quality of life." [Charles Francis and Garth Youngberg, "Sustainable Agriculture — An Overview," in Sustainable Agriculture in Temperate Zones, edited by C.A. Francis, C.B. Flora and L.D. King (New York: Wiley, 1990), p.8. NAL Call # S494.5.S86S87]

"Sustainable agriculture does not mean a return to either the low yields or poor farmers that characterized the 19th century. Rather, sustainability builds on current agricultural achievements, adopting a sophisticated approach that can maintain high yields and farm profits without undermining the resources on which agriculture depends." ["Frequently Asked Questions About Sustainable Agriculture," in Sustainable Agriculture–A New Vision (Union of Concerned Scientists, 1999). Available at UCS Website:

http://www.ucsusa.org/food and environment/sustainable food/ questions-about-sustainable-agriculture.html (8/23/07)]

"A systems approach is essential to understanding sustainability. The system is envisioned in its broadest sense, from the individual farm, to the local ecosystem, and to communities affected by this farming system both locally and globally... A systems approach gives us the tools to explore the interconnections between farming and other aspects of our environment.' [University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP), What is Sustainable Agriculture? (SAREP, 1998). Available at SAREP Website: http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/concept.htm (8/23/07)]

"Environmental sustainability implies the following:

- · meeting the basic needs of all peoples, and giving this priority over meeting the greeds
- keeping population densities, if possible, below the carrying capacity of the region
- adjusting consumption patterns and the design and management of systems to permit the renewal of renewable resources
- conserving, recycling, and establishing priorities for the use of nonrenewable resources keeping environmental impact below the level required to allow the systems affected to recover and continue to evolve.

"An environmentally sustainable agriculture is one that is compatible with and supportive of the above criteria. [Stuart B. Hill, Environmental Sustainability and the Redesign of Agroecosystems (Ecological Agriculture Projects (EAP), McGill University, 1992). Available at EAP Website: http://eap.mcgill.ca/publications/EAP34.htm (2/24/2009)]

Dr. Hill goes on to explain: "To help recognize these real issues I distinguish between shallow (short-term, symbolic) and deep (long-term, fundamental) sustainability. Shallow sustainability focuses on efficiency and substitution strategies with respect to the use of resources. It usually accepts the predominant goals within society without question, and aims to solve problems by means of curative solution. Deep sustainability, in contrast, re-evaluates goals in relation to higher values and redesigns the systems involved in achieving these goals to that this can be done within ecological limits." [Ibid]

Sustainable agriculture is "a way of practicing agriculture which seeks to optimize skills and technology to achieve long-term stability of the agricultural enterprise, environmental protection, and consumer safety. It is achieved through management strategies which help the producer select hybrids and varieties, soil conserving cultural practices, soil fertility programs, and pest management programs. The goal of sustainable agriculture is to minimize adverse impacts to the immediate and off-farm environments while providing a sustained level of production and profit. Sound resource conservation is an integral part of the means to achieve sustainable agriculture." [USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) General Manual (180-GM, Part 407). Available at USDA Website: http://www.info.usda.gov/default.aspx?l=176 Select Title 180; Part 407 - Sustainable Agriculture; Subpart A - General. (10/20/09)]

"Today, sustainable farming practices commonly include:

- crop rotations that mitigate weeds, disease, insect and other pest problems; provide alternative sources of soil nitrogen; reduce soil erosion; and reduce risk of water contamination by agricultural chemicals
- pest control strategies that are not harmful to natural systems, farmers, their neighbors, or consumers. This includes integrated pest management techniques that reduce the need for pesticides by practices such as scouting, use of resistant cultivars, timing of planting, and biological pest controls
- increased mechanical/biological weed control; more soil and water conservation practices; and strategic use of animal and green manures
- use of natural or synthetic inputs in a way that poses no significant hazard to man, animals, or the environment.

"This approach encompasses the whole farm, relying on the expertise of farmers, interdisciplinary teams of scientists, and specialists from the public and private sectors." [Paul F. O'Connell, "Sustainable Agriculture, a Valid Alternative," Outlook on Agriculture (1992) 21(1): p.6. NAL Call # 10 Ou8]

From NGO Sustainable Agriculture Treaty, Global Forum at Rio de Janeiro, June 1-15, 1992:

- "Sustainable agriculture is a model of social and economic organization based on an equitable and participatory vision of development which recognizes the environment and natural resources as the foundation of economic activity. Agriculture is sustainable when it is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate and based on a holistic scientific approach.
- "Sustainable agriculture preserves biodiversity, maintains soil fertility and water purity, conserves and improves the chemical, physical and biological qualities of the soil, recycles natural resources and conserves energy. Sustainable agriculture produces diverse forms of high quality foods, fibers and medicines.
- "Sustainable agriculture uses locally available renewable resources, appropriate and affordable technologies and minimizes the use of external and purchased inputs, thereby increasing local independence and self sufficiency and insuring a source of stable income for peasants, family and small farmers and rural communities. This allows more people to stay on the land, strengthens rural communities and integrates humans with their environment.
- "Sustainable agriculture respects the ecological principles of diversity and interdependence and uses the insights of modern science to improve rather than displace the traditional wisdom accumulated over centuries by innumerable farmers around the world." [These excerpts are from NGO Sustainable Agriculture Treaty (Global Forum at

"Sustainable agriculture does not refer to a prescribed set of practices. Instead, it challenges producers to think about the long-term implications of practices and the broad interactions and dynamics of agricultural systems. It also invites consumers to get more involved in agriculture by learning more about and becoming active participants in their food systems. A key goal is to understand agriculture from an ecological perspective—in terms of nutrient and energy dynamics, and interactions among plants, animals, insects and other organisms in agroecosystems—then balance it with profit, community and consumer needs." [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), Exploring Sustainability in Agriculture: Ways to Enhance Profits, Protect the Environment and Improve Quality of Life." (SARE, 1997). Available at SARE Website: http://www.sare.org/publications/exploring.htm (8/23/07)]

"Sustainable agriculture: A whole-systems approach to food, feed, and other fiber production that balances environmental soundness, social equity, and economic viability among all sectors of the public, including international and intergenerational peoples. Inherent in this definition is the idea that sustainability must be extended not only globally, but indefinitely in time, and to all living organisms including humans.

"Sustainable agroecosystems:

- maintain their natural resource base
- rely on minimum artificial inputs from outside the farm system
- manage pests and diseases through internal regulating mechanisms
- recover from the disturbances caused by cultivation and harvest.

[Stephen R. Gliessman, "An Ecological Definition of Sustainable Agriculture," *Principles of Agroecology and Sustainability* (1998). Available at Agroecology Home Website: http://agroecology.org/Principles_Def.html (6/9/08)]

"Consumers can play a critical role in creating a sustainable food system. Through their purchases, they send strong messages to producers, retailers and others in the system about what they think is important. Food cost and nutritional quality have always influenced consumer choices. The challenge now is to find strategies that broaden consumer perspectives, so that environmental quality, resource use, and social equity issues are also considered in shopping decisions. At the same time, new policies and institution must be created to enable producers using sustainable practices to market their goods to a wider public." [University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP), What is Sustainable Agriculture? (SAREP, 1998). Available at SAREP Website: http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/concept.htm (8/23/07)]

"... I think the community has reached about as explicit, useful, concrete a definition of sus ag [sic] as now possible, or possible at any given time, given the differences of opinion, world view, etc., that exist. At any point in time, in any society, the definition of any concept like sus ag is going to be a compromise among differing world views, sets of values, etc. no one of which has any way to prove the other wrong, or illegitimate. So the sus ag tent is now relatively stable; its shape and innards perhaps fully pleasing to no one, but I am certain there is no real point in debating the fine points anymore because we will simply document more crisply the differences that are out there, and have been all along.... One of the other realities is that the 'definition' of something like sus ag is going to remain fluid, driven by changes in politics, idealogy, science, community values, etc." [Charles Benbrook, *More Soil Quality and Def.* (SANET-mg post, Feb. 1995). Available at SANET-mg Archives Website: http://www.sare.org/sanet-mg/archives/html-home/7-html/0080.html (8/23/07)]

"I concluded some time ago that we didn't need to spend much more time and effort attempting to define sustainability. We have sufficient commonality among our different understandings of it to continue moving in the right general direction, even if we are not yet all moving toward precisely the same destination by the same route. More recently, I have come to the conclusion that we may never have a generally accepted definition of sustainability, and perhaps, we don't need one." [John Ikerd, *On Not Defining Sustainability* (SANET-mg post, May 1998). Available at SANET-mg Archives Website: http://www.sare.org/sanet-mg/archives/html-home/25-html/0203.html (8/23/07)]

"Sustainability' is at once extremely important and practically useless. It consists of a set of concepts which are fundamentally different in nature. That is why there has been no success in attempt to identify THE definition of sustainability. There can be no satisfactory definition which is not multifaceted. This poses serious difficulties for the practical application of sustainability as an objective in real decision making. We have suggested here that these difficulties be addressed by focusing on the particular aspects of sustainability which the decision maker considers to be important, and presenting information about the trade offs between these aspects within a multiple criteria decision making formula." [David J. Pannell and Steven Schilizzi, "Sustainable Agriculture: A Matter of Ecology, Equity, Economic Efficiency or Experience?" Journal of Sustainable Agriculture (1999) 13(4): p.65. NAL Call #: \$494.5 \$868]

The Future of the Sustainable Agriculture Concept

Many in the agricultural community have adopted the sense of urgency and direction pointed to by the sustainable agriculture concept. Lack of sharp definition has not lessened its authenticity. Sustainability has become an integral component of many government, commercial, and non-profit agriculture research efforts, and it is beginning to be woven into agricultural policy. Increasing numbers of farmers and ranchers have embarked on their own paths to sustainability, incorporating integrated and innovative approaches into their own enterprises.

This just-do-it attitude is the real force carrying the issue of sustainability into the next century. "The best way to communicate the meaning of sustainable agriculture is through real-life stories of farmers who are developing sustainable farming systems on their own farms," says John Ikerd, describing the 1,000 Ways to Sustainable Farming project funded by USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. The project sought to explore and refine the definition of sustainable agriculture by profiling successful sustainable farmers and ranchers." SARE continued the project, renaming it *The New American Farmer*. "In addition to describing

successful farming practices, the features in *The New American Farmer* detail the effects of those practices on farm profitability, quality of life, rural communities and the environment." [see *The New American Farmer: Profiles of Agricultural Innovation*, 2nd ed. (SARE, 2005). Available at SARE Website: http://www.sare.org/publications/naf.htm (8/23/07)]

Critical discussion of the sustainable agriculture concept will and should continue. Understanding will deepen; answers will continue to come. On-going dialog is important for another reason: with more parties, each with its own agenda, jumping into the sustainable agriculture "tent," only a continued focus on the real issues and goals will keep sustainable agriculture from becoming so all-encompassing as to become meaningless.

Youngberg and Harwood's 1989 statement still holds true: "We are yet a long way from knowing just what methods and systems in diverse locations will really lead to sustainability... In many regions of the country, however, and for many crops, the particular mix of methods that will allow curtailing use of harmful farm chemicals or building crop diversity, while also providing economic success, are not yet clear. The stage is set for challenging not only farm practitioners, but also researchers, educators, and farm industry." [Garth Youngberg and Richard Harwood, "Sustainable Farming Systems: Needs and Opportunities," American Journal of Alternative Agriculture (1989) 4(3 & 4): p.100. NAL Call # S605.5.A3]

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