Sustainability is about balancing the needs of people and the environment. Often, areas of exceptional biodiversity overlap with important water catchments, that are also centres for agricultural production. Certification schemes and production standards can help to promote sustainability by encouraging good management practices that take account of biodiversity and water. The Biodiversity and Land Use (BLU) project worked to advance certification in the forestry, sugar and fruit industries. An important lesson was that fostering sustainable agricultural industries requires engagement across the whole length of the supply chain, from farmers through processing, retail and eventually to consumers.

Case study series:
Biodiversity and Land Use project
Growing sustainability: Market pressure drives sustainability across value chains
South Africa hosts three of the world’s 36 biodiversity hotspots – the Succulent Karoo, Cape Floristic Region and the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot.

But biodiversity isn’t just found in protected areas. In fact, most of South Africa’s vast biodiversity is found within, around and between production landscapes.

Areas of high biodiversity coincide with notable agricultural landscapes, including the main fruit, sugar and forestry producing regions. Strong agricultural production is important for food security, as a source of employment, and for its economic impact.

The same areas generally overlap with Strategic Water Source Areas (SWSAs) – the 10% of the country’s land area that delivers more than 50% of its water.

Balancing the needs of these overlapping land uses is what sustainability is all about. One way to achieve a good balance between biodiversity, water and agriculture is through certification schemes. The market increasingly demands certified products, which confirm that producers are acting responsibly towards the environment and people. Certification schemes are most effective when they are implemented by a majority of producers. Widespread adoption of certification schemes requires work across the supply chain, from the supply side and demand side. Engaging with producers is necessary because this is where the sustainability actually happens on the ground. Industry associations can be an effective way to reach many producers. Further along the value chain, larger supply chain members involved in processing or retail can generate significant push towards uptake by making sourcing decisions and requiring certification from their suppliers. Ultimately, all certification meets a growing call from consumers for products that are sustainably produced.
Forestry: Small growers recognised by forestry certification

Already more than 80% of South Africa’s plantations are under forestry certification. Certification promotes responsible forest management, as well as other social and economic benefits. But the 20% of the industry that remain uncertified are the small timber growers – family and community operations whose small woodlots are their livelihoods. Mr Patrick Belebese, of NCT says “In the areas in which they operate, small timber growers are making immense contributions towards socio-economic stability… but they are invisible in certified timber supply.” The steep requirements for certification have closed the market to small growers, who ironically have lower ecological impact, with smaller footprints, less mechanisation and attentive onsite owner-managers.

Efforts to improve certification access for small growers have been underway for many years. From this experience grew the realisation that a new system for certification was needed to cater for small growers, and the value-based certification approach was developed. It works by identifying all the risks that an operation could pose to ecological and social values, but then assessing only those that are relevant to the land parcel being certified. Small operations have fewer risks, so they only have to consider those aspects that are relevant to them.

The Sustainable African Forestry Assurance Scheme (SAFAS) was created as the vehicle for value-based certification. It is endorsed by the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification, giving this homegrown scheme global recognition. In late 2020, the first audited certification was made under the SAFAS scheme. There is already strong demand, evidenced by growing applications to SAFAS for certification.

In this case, efforts were needed at the supply side, to help a neglected subset of producers access an established certification value chain.

Sugar: Sugar mills champion certification

Sugar is a monoculture crop with relatively high-water requirements, but there are a range of environmentally-friendly production practices that can reduce its impact. SUSFarms, or the Sustainable Sugarcane Farm Management System, is a sustainable production standard that is centred on three pillars: prosperity, people and planet. The SUSFarms system requires a detailed farm map and a land-use plan, but its core is a self-assessment tool, where the farmer completes an annual progress tracker.

There are approximately 20,000 small sugar cane farmers and about 1,100 larger producers in South Africa. If efforts were focussed only at the supply side of the value chain, it may be difficult to convince all of these to become involved in certification. However, all of these producers supply only six sugar cane milling companies who process the cane at their 14 mills. Several milling companies, notably Illovo, stepped forward to champion the adoption of SUSFarms through their procurement systems. The mills were responding to calls from consumers for sustainable sugar, but also recognised that farmers adopting water-efficient practices would give better assurance of supply.

This case shows how large, central links in the supply chain can encourage broad uptake of certification, spreading it across the value chain and passing on the benefits to retailers and consumers.
At times, as much as 50% of the apples and pears on the shelves at UK grocery stores come from the orchards of the Western Cape. These retailers, acting on appeals from their customers and investors, are adopting ambitious sustainability goals. Certification can help retailers identify sustainable suppliers.

The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA) is the sustainability arm of FruitSA, an umbrella body for the fruit industry. The original SIZA production standard was focussed on social aspects, with a commitment to fair and ethical labour practices. Through the BLU project, a complementary environmental standard was developed that covered aspects of soil, water, ecosystems, biodiversity, energy, materials and waste. But there were already many certification models being used by different buyers in the fruit industry. So, engagement with retailers was needed for the SIZA standard to be accepted under their preferred certification systems. These efforts helped to streamline multiple certification requirements, reduce administrative burden on farmers and encourage more efficient data sharing.

The SIZA environmental standard is being enthusiastically taken up by fruit farmers because it fulfils a need for their efforts towards environmental sustainability to be recognised. This case proves how pressure from the demand side of the supply chain can motivate producers to take part in certification. The story does not end there. The engagements with retailers sparked even more direct investment into the sustainability of their supplier landscapes. The Courtauld 2025 Water Ambition project will be focusing on scaling up the biodiversity and water stewardship work to the catchment-level.