

# 'Big Food' companies have less power than you might think

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A Dartmouth study finds that "Big Food" companies are striving to make food more sustainable from farm to factory but have less power than you might think. In fact, most Big Food companies have little knowledge about or control over the farmers who supply their raw materials. The study's findings were published in the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*.

As Big Food companies have grown increasingly concerned about climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, many have set ambitious goals to reduce emissions, energy and water use across their supply chains. Reducing on-farm impacts is an especially high priority, because these generally account for a larger share of food's environmental footprint than transport or processing. But most Big Food companies know little about the sustainability of the farms supplying their corn, wheat and soy, because they procure these staple ingredients not directly from farmers but rather from commodity trading companies such as Cargill or Archer Daniels Midlands. As the Dartmouth study shows, the commodity traders also know remarkably little about the farms they buy from, despite their unparalleled access to other forms of market intelligence.

Many major food companies are pursuing [agricultural sustainability](#) as members of multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Walmart-backed Sustainability Consortium and Field to Market. Alongside nongovernmental organizations such as WWF and The Nature Conservancy, they have developed a variety of tools for collecting data

about on-farm emissions, energy and natural resource use. The challenge is getting farmers to cooperate. Few companies offer to pay farmers for this information, despite the time required to compile it. Guarantees of confidentiality have also not reassured farmers about how companies might use their data.

Conflicting priorities inside Big Food companies can also slow progress toward more sustainable supply chains. "A lot of the people who work on [sustainability](#) for these companies are really committed to changing things for the better," says study author, Susanne Freidberg, a professor of geography at Dartmouth, "but they don't always have the resources and buy-in that they need to push the industry as far and as fast as it needs to go."

Provided by Dartmouth College

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