Farm Talk

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Ag research gets bad press

If the typical consumer thinks at all about agricultural research, it's probably because of some newspaper account of how money is being wasted on some meaningless government effort. Reporters love to isolate a research project that they really don't understand and then make fun of it.

In their zeal to uncover government waste and wrongdoing, they focus on the smallest bit of a huge mosaic and conclude that time and money are being wasted because they see no relevance in the work. In their infinite wisdom they destroy in print what could easily be another human's life's work. They make the researcher look silly, they laugh at what he does, and they warn the public to beware of such government waste now and in the future.

No doubt there are government research efforts that lack proper focus — and perhaps some of them appear at first glance to be silly. But does that make it so? Just because a researcher isn't looking for something that a farmer can take to the field, is he wasting time?

Example — a bee that makes baggies. That's right, a Department of Agriculture research effort involves a bee that excretes a kind of polyester that resembles a little plastic bag. The bees use them to shield their underground broods. But what possible good would they produce for mankind?

The Wall Street Journal considers this and many other agricultural research efforts a waste of tax money. But is that really being fair and does the reporter who made fun of the effort really understand it well enough to point out its uselessness? Granted, it's a reporter's lot to be suspicious of everything, but does he really think a scientist would spend time and money on a project with no purpose?

Perhaps it's the researcher's fault for not being willing to talk with a reporter. Or maybe it's the way researchers write about the things they do. But I'll bet anything that researcher is an intelligent, dedicated individual who knows what he is doing and can fit that little piece of the mosaic into a picture that does have significance for mankind.

Instead of horror stories about wasted agricultural research dollars, consumers need to know that agricultural research is working in the Department of Agriculture and in college agricultural experiment stations across the country.

It's still the best hope for increasing out own food supply and offering continued assistance to the hungry people of the world. That opinion has been expressed by agricultural leaders, some of them connected with agricultural research organizations, but many of them knowledgeable agricultural spokesmen who know that the only way to keep up with an ever-growing world population is through increased technology. And while agricultural research is making important breakthroughs, a lot more needs to be done and a lot more could be done if the research funds were available.

Sure, everybody in government needs more money, but the agricultural research organizations, primarily the state agricultural experiment stations and the U.S. Depatment of Agriculture, are spending relatively small amounts. And yet the payoff has been quite good.

At a time when most people in this country are pretty well fed, it's difficult to raise much enthusiasm for agricultural research. Appropriations are based on today's food needs rather than looking ahead 10 or 20 years. Perhaps we're still suffering under the surpluses that existed in the 1950s and 1960s and the farm problems that have plagued us ever since the 1930s.

At any rate, agricultural research has been given low priority compared to national defense, the energy crisis and so many other hot issues. Yet when you look ahead a few years, you can see the U.S. population is going to outstrip the available food supply unless new technology is brought into the system.

Right now American farmers are producing more of most foods than U.S. consumers want. So a lot is available for export. That export is important, not only to our trade position with other countries but also to the food supply of a lot of people.

American farmers have met the challenge of increased food production fairly well over the past years. When more of something has been needed, it's usually been there. But the heavy thinkers in agriculture seem to agree that it can't go on forever. That unless some major breakthroughs occur, one of these days we are going to run out. And depending on who you listen to, that could be a long time from now or it could be only a few years.

So instead of stop-gap, brush fire kinds of research, they say it's time to get back to the basics of agricultural research. To take a long look and set up a program that will go about solving some of the big technology problems that agriculture faces.

Unfortunately, agricultural research is like so many other things. You get about what you pay for. Occasionally, some researcher with a few bucks will stumble onto some great achievement, but this is rare. The big payoffs come through hard work on the part of a lot of people, using the best equipment and working over an extended period of time.

Research cutbacks over the years have caused the Department of Agriculture to reduce its research force. The state experiment stations are having problems because increased appropriations have not nearly kept pace with steadily growing inflation.

No one is crying wolf in the case of agricultural research. There's no question but that the need for food will be overwhelming. The question is, can we continue to squeeze out more production with current technology and the research breakthroughs that are coming along?

Granted, the polyester bee isn't going to feed the world's hungry people unless it can figure a way to pack a sandwich in each of those little bags it makes. And there are plenty of other research efforts that won't solve the world's food problems either. But dedicated scientists are at work — plugging away at seemingly meaningless projects — little pieces of a big mosaic. One that continues to change to meet our growing demands. It's a good system, it works, and it deserves support.

The challenge rests with the researchers to make the press, and ultimately the consumers, understand that.

York receives conservation funds

YORK — York County farmers who received storm-related damages from the heavy rainstorm on June 16 may apply to the York County Ag Stabilization and Conservation Service office for emergency conservation funding. The York office has recieved a total of $5,000 to cost share emergency conservation practices; including grading, shaping, releveling; removing debris from farmland; restoring permanent fences and restoring structures and other installations.

According to Peggyann Carnill, ASCS Director, interested farmers must apply to the York ASCS office by August 27. Applications must be approved by the York County ASC Commitee before a farmer can begin installation of the conservation practice. For approved applications, ASCS will pay 64% of the total costs to install the practice.

In addition to the emergency conservation funding, $12,000 has been granted to York County for special agricultural conservation practices. These funds are to be used in the South Branch of the Codorus Creek and the Conewago Creek watersheds. Any farmer who lives in either of these watersheds can apply for funds for strip cropping, terrace systems, diversions and sod waterways.