

USDA FARM FORUM

Ohio State University Farm Science Review

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Honorable Mike Johanns, USDA Secretary of Agriculture

Dear Mr. Secretary, Thank you for being here.

I rise to respond to one or more of the six questions you asked the public to answer. I think my answer best fits with your sixth question; namely, "How should agricultural product development, marketing and research-related issues be addressed in the next farm bill?" You have my permission to address it in one or more of the other issues as well.

"Ain't it awful?" That's the way I interpreted Dave Mowitz's September, 04 Successful Farming article! He told of an Iowa State Ag Engineer Extension Assistant Professor who just did good, practical things with farmers, but who had to leave the university. Without knowing the merits of this particular case, I think Dave correctly identified a symptom of a major problem. For various reasons, less Land Grant money is now being directed to teaching farmers the decision-making, problem-solving process and to providing unbiased and unbundled farm management information. Also, tenure requirements do not favor most persons who just work on these things.

Rather than just retiring and resignedly repeating, "ain't it awful?" I prefer playing offense. I now propose another solution. Together, we can do it. It is our significant opportunity. Otherwise, it WON'T just happen!

Doing nothing is an alternative that worries me. The seed patent law of 30+ years ago changed US Agriculture forever. But, I still want my descendants, and yours, to have the opportunity to thrive as successful independent decision-making producers, not barely survive as serfs taking internet orders from someone in Basel, Switzerland, Beijing, China, on the moon or wherever.

I now think it's time to revitalize the Land Grant system and re-level the playing field. While farmers now farm more acres, most cornbelt farms are still one-combine family operations, the very descendants of the producers and consumers who benefited from the Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln some 140 years ago. That act, and others that followed, provided the way for small farmers to learn how to improve their problem-solving process and to get unbiased, unbundled, management information from Land Grant research, teaching, and extension. Most farmers are still small, compared to the multi-national firms they buy from and sell to. Their need to learn the problem-solving process and to get unbiased, unbundled information is still great.

For multiple reasons, state and federal legislators have cut funds for practical farm research, teaching, and extension. Food is not scarce. Farm-raised kids are now in the minority in many Land Grant Ag Colleges. "Farmers" can specialize and buy and sell more from rapidly integrating multi-national firms, but these firms often bundle their, perhaps biased, management advice with their products and services. I say, farmers must have the management skills and information to challenge the numbers of the firms they contract with. The public sector, that is the Land Grant system, has the comparative advantage for providing this.

Administrators and policy-makers can consider the above statements and make different conclusions. Many colleges have chosen to broaden their appeal to non-farm kids, even at the expense of losing their comparative advantage for serving the farm audience.

I, and I hope you, will look at the numbers and needs of farmers, and conclude, "WOW, what an opportunity! With so many others de-emphasizing farming education, **SOME LAND GRANTS CAN and SHOULD EMPHASIZE IT!** And, with improving communications, students can be almost any age and live almost anywhere." Who knows, you might even ask Congress to financially reward some Land Grants to serve farmers in all the states they touch, or whatever.

But, I came here to offer you a handout, not to just ask you for one. While I'm now speaking only for myself, I think many of my farmer friends and clients are now able, and will be willing, to appropriately pay Land Grants variable costs for helping to discover, deliver, and use unbiased, unbundled management information. Some Land Grant faculty and staff still have the comparative advantage to discover, deliver, and teach. I offer to help you and your colleagues test that hypothesis.

I stand here as an independent farmer, an independent farm management consultant, and a very independent Land Grant professor emeritus. Unless you and I do some things like I now propose, I predict all three of my professions will be nearly dead long before I'm laid in the grave.

Now, as the person who coined the term, "site-specific" farming, in a Purdue University paper 22 years ago, I will quickly propose two projects and a teaching, learning method to present to farmers to test the hypothesis that many farmers are able and willing to pay Land Grants for the right unbiased, unbundled management information. I am personally familiar with the potential of both of these projects, and I personally know Land Grant faculty who are still able and willing to make these into effective, efficient, and enjoyable programs. They are:

(1) Site-specific grain crop farming, and (2) site-specific dairy grazing, where, say, a half-dozen farmers who don't compete for land, but do have similar soils, use the same protocol to produce the same, and different, seed, fertilizer, chemical, tillage recipes with the assistance of a Land Grant person who uses newly perfected statistics to analyze the data and reports significant effects on yields and profit. By working together, these farmers can expect to get significant unbiased, unbundled management information in perhaps two-three seasons instead of in perhaps 10-20 seasons of testing by themselves. The data can remain privately owned, and the participants can have the preliminary results long before they are published in a referred journal.

By nurturing several of the groups, Land Grant faculty, perhaps with the help of independent consultants, can be extremely productive. Both farmer and consultant productivity can be enhanced by teaching farm couples how to evaluate and advise another farm couple's performance, say, three times per year. My wife and I effectively, efficiently, and enjoyably now nurture similar groups.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to your response, and also to the response of the audience who just heard this. Please contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,
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