

## **The Greatest Challenge Facing Agriculture Over the Next 5 Years**

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The greatest challenge facing agriculture over the next five years is being able to convince our world leaders, as well as the population, that sustainable agriculture is not only attainable, but necessary. The continued production of food, fiber, and fuel is critical to human survival. World population estimates are set to rise to 10 billion by the year 2050. Preparation for this dramatic increase will require our agricultural producers to expand their operations to meet the world needs. Our leaders need to be persuaded to empower our producers in their expansion efforts, however, several obstacles must be overcome before any growth can be achieved.

According to the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, the average age of our farming population is 57 years. This has been an upward trend for many decades due to the younger generations leaving the farm for higher education and increased income opportunities. With the recent rise in commodity prices, producers are seeing their profits rise along with their quality of life. This fact is making the farming profession more attractive to new farmers, but with the cost of land, equipment, seed, and other inputs coupled with the lessened willingness of banks to lend money very few are willing to take the risk. Incentives such as lease to own operations need to be developed to attract and retain new producers.

Diversification and education of the traditional farming operation needs to be implemented. There is a large growth of interest in the support of locally grown food. Small scale additions of fresh fruit and vegetable production can help supplement farm income and help introduce the general public to the importance of agriculture. For many years, farmers have discouraged outsiders from visiting their farms due to the fears of litigation if someone was accidentally injured. This practice has helped alienate the public from the farming community by excluding them from the farm experience. There is no better way to educate people about the importance of one's industry than to directly involve them through hands on methods.

Regulatory acts regarding the use of pesticides need to be made based on the results of unbiased, university sponsored, scientific studies, not the whims of environmental extremists. There are certain areas of the United States, primarily the Southeast, that rely heavily on pesticides due to the abundance of weed, insects, and disease pressures. These tools, when properly and judiciously used, increase productivity and insure the levels of production required to meet demand. Common sense approaches to regulatory issues will help producers and governing authorities make proper decisions regarding pesticides.

Animal husbandry practices need to be explained to a better degree than they have to this point in time. The public needs to understand that every livestock producer has no incentive to

not properly care for their animals. Animals raised for food are given the best care possible to insure a top quality product that is humanely harvested. There is a huge difference between food animals and pets, but this fact is muddled in the translation and used to negate the importance of the animal agriculture industry. Again, proper, research based, scientific facts need to be the basis of decisions.

The agriculture industry is changing at an alarming speed. Crop production is increasing yearly and the crops being grown are very diverse. This has caused our producers to find themselves attempting to grow new crops seeking help with their production decisions. Our country is blessed with the Land Grant system that has an extensive history in providing assistance to our producers. Our universities conduct critical agriculture research on a variety of issues that our producers encounter daily. The data generated from this research is disseminated through local extension agents directly to the producers through various methods. The important part of this process is the relationships that are formed between the researchers, extension agents, and the producers. For our agriculture community to expand, thrive, and meet the needs of the future it is imperative that this system be maintained.

Our leaders need to be educated on the importance of agriculture in our society. Many of our decision makers have not had the privilege of tilling the earth or feeding a food animal. They have had very few opportunities to view the agriculture community or see how it fits into everyday life. When people believe their food comes from Wal-Mart instead of a farm, it is hard to convince them that agriculture is important. Our leaders need to be educated on the needs of our agriculture producers and the effect their decisions have on the farming community. The greatest challenge will be to get them to listen.