Editorial
Got Research? Finding Opportunities in a New Age

The facts are clearly in. This will come as no surprise to either the farmers or researchers who regularly read the Fruit Quarterly. Agricultural research and development budgets at the state and federal level have shrunk considerably in the past several years. An August 2013 Science Magazine editorial cited a 26% decline in federal USDA spending for agricultural and food research over the past decade – while at the same time competing countries like China, India and Brazil have significantly increased their agricultural R&D spending. At Cornell University’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, there has been a corresponding decrease of state support of about 28% over the past five years. The question now is what do we do about it?

Despite the wonderful long-term opportunities for farmers in connecting with consumers, and the obvious fact that “foodiesm” is here to stay with both the positives and negatives that implies, agricultural research seems to be left out of the public dialogue. Why? I would argue that’s because we’ve both been victims of our own success (very few elected officials or their staffers go to bed hungry) and also because agricultural research is abstract. There’s little emotion that surrounds development of a mechanical thinning model for vineyards that saves grape farmers money. While the farmer impacted might get a little emotional as the bottom line is a bit better, there’s no ability to name a budget initiative, or a legislative proposal, after a grape vine to garner public attention and demand public action. There’s very little connection between the fact that it was basic federal Hatch dollars, and SUNY funding for extension that enabled this research, and its dissemination, to filter into the farm community and save growers money.

The question we need to be asking ourselves is why, in the face of such enthusiasm for New York agriculture, we’re still collectively scratching our heads and trying to figure out why policy makers and the people who hold the purse strings do not yet fully understand how important agricultural research and development is, not just to the state’s farm community, but to the nation’s food security overall. From my perspective, the answer is fairly simple. We haven’t yet developed a unified “ask” of our elected officials, both state and federal, and nor have we yet coalesced around the concept of “how” to convince philanthropic organizations or companies to step up their private funding efforts.

If I have learned anything in the brief time I have been working for CALS, it’s that competition for funding at the academic level is ferocious. Targeted, thoughtful initiatives can secure state and federal funding – but whether those funding goals are the same goals as that of the farmer in the field is another aspect to consider. It’s clear that we are all, whether researchers in their labs or farmers in their fields, searching for an answer that we have not yet fully developed.

It’s clear that the overall answer will eventually become a clear and consistent strategy of communications engagement with our elected officials at all levels of government on the need for agricultural research – and a way to make that appeal on both economic and emotional grounds. We also will need to combine private fundraising from growers, companies, and philanthropic organizations. A clear path forward doesn’t yet exist, but with persistence, patience, and a little hard work unifying the agricultural community around a central concept for applied agricultural research, I am confident we can accomplish great things in the future. With all the challenges ahead of us, we also have tremendous opportunities.

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COVER: Apple Pollination.
Photo Courtesy of Gabino Reginato
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