Editorial

An idea for a partnership of agricultural producers and government to fund research

Farmer in New York State have been successfully producing a very diverse number of agricultural products for many years. Success has come partly because of our climate and soils but also because producers have been on the cutting edge of new technologies and growing practices that have allowed us to compete with other production areas. We all agree that production research and producer educational programs are vital for us to stay competitive and successful in the future. Today we must ask: how can we maintain the level of research and extension needed to keep us in business? Where will the money come from to conduct the research and educational programing and how do we make sure it is spent wisely? Can a mechanism be created for grower and industry funds that can be matched at some level with government funds to get the job done? How do we make sure there is coordination and collaboration between researchers and educators? Existing, but diminishing, public funds are not and will not be adequate to support the research and education programs growers and the wider public need. A better coordinated, more efficient system would complete the critical function of allocating these funds to their best purpose more effectively than the existing system can. More private sector dollars and a demonstrably efficient, accountable, well-coordinated system is necessary to move government to recognize that matching public investments, along with grower investments in agricultural research, extension and education will provide high returns and spur practitioners to make those investments.

This discussion has been on-going the last few years and an idea has emerged. What if an organization existed with one of its jobs being to get producers to prioritize the production issues they see as critical to being successful? It could take those issues to the research and education professionals and solicit proposals from them that address the high priority producer issues. Then, the producers who are contributing financial support decide which proposals will best solve these identified production issues. Finally, this organization would work with the researchers and educators to make sure the required work gets done in a cost efficient way. After the research is done, it could make sure the information gets to the producers so they can put it to work to make their businesses profitable into the future. The organization would ensure that grower funds are used for projects producers request and available government funds are added to the efforts.

Ten years ago, the New York Farm Viability Institute (NYFVI) was formed to fund research and education projects that would improve the profitability of agriculture producers in NYS. It started with some federal funds and has been funded by annual state appropriations since. What if the NYFVI was changed so it facilitated a government match to funds producers are already investing in research and education projects and was operated as described in the paragraph above? NYFVI might also receive federal and corporate funds that could also be used to match grower funds. Besides facilitating the process, NYFVI could also coordinate projects that have impact in more than one commodity area. NYFVI could do all this if the producers of NYS believe it would be beneficial and would leverage their personal contributions. This model could be applied to all of NY agriculture, keeping us on the cutting edge and profitable into the future. Many grower-funded and managed programs, including the Apple Research and Development Program, provide critical support every year for research that improves the profitability of fruit, vegetable, dairy, and corn and soybean production. We can substantially improve the existing system through better coordination and efficiency, more opportunity for the public to recognize the benefits of applied research; and most important, by using grower dollars as a lever to add government matching funds to the effort. Some commodity groups do not put anything into research or education. If a government match was available, it would be an incentive for (Continued on p.2)

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COVER: A 5-year old high density Rainer sweet cherry orchard covered with a high tunnel to prevent rain cracking.
Photo courtesy of Terence Robinson
(Editorial, cont.)

those growers to contribute to research and education projects that will help their industry.

This idea has been discussed for a few years now and it is time to put it into motion. Some details need to be worked out, but we do need to start with a few grower groups and get moving along this path. What are your thoughts? We need to get producer feedback on this plan so it can be implemented in the near future. Please, contact me with your thoughts. I would be glad to hear from you.

Jim Bittner
Fruit grower and Chair of the NYFVI. Jim@singerfarms.com
716-778-7330