

## Food, Agriculture, Research and Extension

The number of Americans involved in agriculture has dropped below 1.5% of the population. This is a pretty amazing statistic in light of this nation's agricultural heritage. Even as recently as WWII, most American families tended a Victory Garden, not only to have food available but as an act of patriotism. No more. The fact is, every American is tied to agriculture whether they like or appreciate it or not. In fact, three times a day and for many even more often than that, whenever something passes across the lips and enters the mouth, they are connecting to agriculture. Agriculture is more important than ever in the nation's security and independence yet it hardly gets a mention in political and economic conversations. Did you ever hear agriculture mentioned even once during the presidential campaign? One commentator has suggested that the title of "Secretary of Agriculture" be changed to "Secretary of Food" because that is what most how most Americans connect to agriculture, through the food we eat, not the farming we do.

As the number of farmers dwindles, the productivity and sustainability of our farms becomes increasingly important. Every day farmers work and live in close contact with nature and are subject to its whims, from drought to floods and every conceivable condition in between. Farmers are mostly loners, happy to spend hours on end tending a field or driving a tractor, and solving problems. In fact, when I was farming I considered myself mostly a problem solver. Every day, something would break, a disease would affect the vines, an employee would have a problem, a customer couldn't make a payment, or whatever. At times it was hard to squeeze in the farming.

Despite their solitary demeanor farmers know that they can't farm in isolation and, in fact, farming is very much a collective effort between customers, vendors, nature, processors, distributors and, of course, research and extension. About as close as agricultural extension has come to popular culture was the occasional appearance of Hank Kimball, the county agent in the tv sitcom "Green Acres." As cooperative extension and research programs struggle for funding in the "new economy" they remain more relevant and vital to agriculture as ever, even as their numbers shrink and relevance is questioned.

The wine industry is a good example of the importance of research and extension to the success and growth of an emerging agricultural industry. In 1999 there were 42 bonded wineries in Pennsylvania and today there are over 130. Yes, wine is still a small industry compared to the traditional giants but it has the ability to make a contribution to the Commonwealth far beyond its relative size. And, no, research and extension did not directly cause this growth. But it certainly contributed to it by improving the knowledge and abilities of wine growers. We need agriculture to connect to the public. Did you know that Napa Valley recently surpassed Disneyland and the #1 tourist attraction in California? We are talking about a big state with a lot of attractions. There is no reason why wine agri-tourism couldn't have the same impact in Pennsylvania.

To push both quality and production in grapes and wine, a research and extension apparatus from Brock University in Ontario to North Carolina State provides information and services to the

wine industry. The amount of work and information output are astonishing, and all made possible by natural partnerships among research and extension personnel that transcend any borders or institutions. The wine industry is well served and most wine growers understand and appreciate the essential role that research and extension education play in their businesses and lives. In a global economy the only thing that can save or sustain an industry is the quality of its product. You need only to look at the U.S. auto industry for the outcome of a lapse in quality. Research helps farmers to solve problems but it cannot occur in a vacuum so extension education is the critical link to the farm. It is a beautiful closed loop that, when functioning properly, benefits every single American who eats, and that is most of us.

So the next time you take a bite of food, consider the forces and people who made that morsel or drink possible. We desperately need to stop taking our food and food sources for granted. Because they are so closely linked to nature, and mankind has threatened nature, agriculture is in a precarious position. By constantly improving our knowledge and technology we can create a more sustainable system that enhances both quality and productivity without harming the environment. But technology alone cannot save or feed us. We have to live and eat smarter and more sustainably and that applies to both producers and consumers. The fact of the matter is that everyone who eats has a stake in agriculture.

Mark L. Chien  
Statewide Viticulture Extension Educator  
Penn State Cooperative Extension  
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