

MAJOR CHANGES FOR AGRICULTURE

A recent Herald Journal article announced the appointment of USU Professor, Dr. Douglas Jackson-Smith to serve as a member of the National Food and Agriculture Policy Initiative's research advisory committee. This committee will have significant impact on national agricultural policy. I agree with Doug's assessment that dialogue on the committee will be "a complicated conversation".

There is a wide diversity of opinion regarding the sustainability and economic viability of farms and ranches in the United States. There are also varied assessments of food safety, animal welfare, food security and environmental accountability. There is agreement that changes are coming. The constant volatility of agricultural markets is forcing sweeping changes.

Scott Stewart, President and CEO of Stewart-Peterson, authored a special report entitled, "Heads Up: A Futuristic View of U.S. Agriculture and the World, and What You Can Do to Protect Your Prosperity." Among other things, Stewart teaches that it is statistically difficult to predict the future, but when we think something can't happen, it does.

The report states that agriculturists can plan on "permanent volatility" in the marketplace and that many independent producers will not be able to survive, even with record high commodity prices. Stewart teaches that buy-and-hold commodity investors are here to stay and that agricultural exports will continue to expand to a growing global middle class. As other sectors of the economy continue to struggle, outside investors will buy up more farmland, considering agriculture to be a good investment. When outside investors buy the farms, many producers will no longer be farming land they own. They will simply be working for outside investors.

Secretary of State Clinton spoke at the International Food Policy Research Institute last week. She outlined details of food and humanitarian assistance the United States is giving to people impacted by severe drought along the Horn of Africa. The needs are daunting with more than 12 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia in danger of starvation. Refugee camps are overcrowded with more people coming daily. As she described heartbreaking conditions among those people, Secretary Clinton said, "We must also maintain our focus on the future by continuing to invest in long-term food security in countries that are susceptible to drought and food shortages". Food security is essential for all nations, including the United States. We wonder sometimes if food security is indeed a national priority.

At their recent Annual Meeting, Chris Policinski, President and CEO of Land O'Lakes, Inc., lamented the fact that certain factions of our society oppose the use of technology in agriculture. There seems to be a prevailing view that organically grown food is "better" than conventional or biotech production. Instead of focusing on how to feed a hungry world, we attempt to define "good" agriculture versus "bad" agriculture. To bring some clarity to this issue, Land O'Lakes had a leading consulting firm review the research on the nutritional content of organic and conventionally produced food. More than 50 studies were examined, and they showed little or no difference in the nutritional value of foods produced organically and conventionally.

Policinski said; “Because only 2 percent of Americans are directly involved with agriculture, many people have no idea of the complex system that puts food on their table. There is a compelling need for large farms and advanced technologies and management practices. These operations are capable of producing the large quantities of safe, economical food necessary to feed a growing global population. At the same time, there is also an important role for smaller farming operations with sustainable business models. They help keep rural communities vibrant and ensure customer and consumer choice.”

I know Dr. Jackson-Smith to be a good thinker and a careful listener. I am happy for his appointment to service on this national agricultural committee. I agree there are modifications to be made in our current system of food production. I hope we don't get too drastic, however, in overhauling a system that has provided the safest, most dependable source of quality food the world has ever known. Food Security must indeed be a national and world priority.