

Pursuing a Unifying Message

Elevating Food, Agricultural and Natural Resources Research as a National Priority

A Commodity Research Perspective



Charles Valentine Riley
Memorial Foundation

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Resources Research as a National Priority*

A Commodity Research Perspective

Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation

Iowa State University

National Corn Growers Association

and

Purdue University

in a partnership with

Colorado State University, Mississippi State University,
Soil and Water Conservation Society, Texas A&M University,
Texas Tech University and Virginia Tech

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The Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation is committed to promoting a broader and more complete understanding of agriculture and to building upon Charles Valentine Riley's legacy as a "whole picture" person with a vision for enhancing agriculture through scientific knowledge.

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Acknowledgements

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The roundtable was co-chaired by Chris Novak, Jay Akridge and Wendy Wintersteen. The members of the roundtable steering committee are listed on the next page; we thank them and their organizations for helping to convene the roundtable and for their individual service and commitment.

Twenty-five representatives participated in the roundtable, and provided valuable and diverse contributions. A special thanks to the presenters who provided valuable background and perspectives to the day's discussions: Chris Novak, National Corn Growers; Jay Akridge, Purdue University; Randy Russell, the Russell Group; Deb Atwood, AgREE; Andrew LaVigne, N-CFAR; and Catherine Woteki, USDA.

Victor Lechtenberg did a tremendous job facilitating the discussion, and his time and efforts in preparing for a successful meeting were very much appreciated. Valuable contributions to the development and finalizing of the report were made by Susan Thompson and Brian Meyer of Iowa State University.

Steering Committee

Chris Novak, Chief Executive Officer, National Corn Growers Association (co-chair)

Jay Akridge, Glenn W. Sample Dean of Agriculture, College of Agriculture, Purdue University (co-chair)

Wendy Wintersteen, Endowed Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Iowa State University (co-chair)

Danielle Beck, Director of Government Affairs, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Greg Bohach, Vice President, Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine, Mississippi State University

Neil Dierks, Chief Executive Officer, National Pork Producers Council

Hank Giclas, Sr. Vice President, Strategic Planning, Science & Technology, Western Growers

David Inall, Senior Vice President, United Egg Producers

Richard Joost, Director of Supply Programs, United Soybean Board

Steve Verett, Treasurer, Southwest Council of Agribusiness; Executive Vice President, Plains Cotton Growers, Inc.

Andrew Walmsley, Director, Congressional Relations, American Farm Bureau Federation

Colin Woodall, Vice President, Government Affairs, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Vic Lechtenberg, College of Agriculture, Purdue University (*retired*) (Facilitator)

Highlights

On November 1, 2016, a group representing 25 agricultural commodity organizations gathered to discuss the idea of pursuing a unifying message to elevate food, agricultural and natural resources research as a national priority. Selected highlights from the roundtable discussion are listed below.

- **Strength in numbers.** Having a broad coalition providing a unified message is respected in political circles. It demonstrates different groups worked together to develop a set of priorities.
- **Broaden the scope.** Taking a broad approach to a unifying message gives participants the opportunity to identify allies who haven't been considered earlier that might support the effort. If the message continues to vary depending on the group presenting it, or there isn't a new vision being offered with strong support from a larger coalition, agriculture research funding will continue to be trapped in the same cycle.
- **Proactive stance.** For agriculture, a proactive stance to emerging issues or threats requires a broad, far-reaching vision, across agencies. It is critical for pressing threats to agriculture to be translated in a way the general public, and Congress, will understand.
- **Questions that need answers.** Overproduction in some segments of the U.S. agricultural system results in questions about why additional research is needed when surplus commodities exist. Since Americans don't see any food shortages in their local grocery store, they may not see the need for more research. A better connection needs to be made between agricultural research and an abundant food supply.
- **Make a human connection.** One reason the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding has increased significantly over the past two decades is because there's an immediate connection for individuals to things such as cancer. A unifying message needs to do a better job of talking about the human benefits of past, present and future agriculture research projects. And yet the message needs to be simple, precise and focused on the public good.
- **Public-private intersection.** Identify places where the public good and the private sector intersect. One concept is innovation institutes focused on topics such as the microbiome — where the food system and microbiome all comes together. The result could be greater innovations and faster payoffs.
- **Research misperception.** One of the challenges to getting increased funding for agricultural research may be a misperception that research is all about agricultural productivity. The focus broadly encompasses enhancing health, utilization of resources and sustainability. The story of research must be told in a way to connect with consumers, not just policymakers.
- **Federal-state research system.** The land-grant university system, in partnership with the USDA, has been integral to the success of U.S. agriculture. A review of the system should include whether some programs could be regionalized instead of separate in every state and how to take better advantage of USDA Agricultural Research Service laboratories. These discussions will inform what the partnership of the future looks like.

Introduction and Background

The commodity research roundtable was the fifth event associated with an effort to pursue a unifying message on food, agricultural and natural resources research, organized by the Charles Valentine Riley Memorial Foundation (RMF) and its partners. This report summarizes key themes discussed and input received during the roundtable held November 1, 2016, and hosted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science headquarters in Washington, D.C.

In introductory remarks, Wendy Wintersteen, RMF president, said C. V. Riley believed in taking a broad view of agriculture and its impact on society and the world. She said the foundation was continuing his efforts through a series of roundtable discussions with different groups on how to bring the issue of funding of food, agriculture and natural resources research to the forefront of discussions held by Congress as they think about what should be the investment in science.

“We believe the grand challenges facing society are squarely in this area of agricultural sciences, so how can we move that issue forward?”

Two speakers helped set the stage for the roundtable discussions that followed — **Chris Novak**, National Corn Growers Association chief executive officer, and **Jay Akridge**, dean of the Purdue University College of Agriculture.

From the producer perspective, Novak said farmers are seeing more innovations and technologies coming from private companies. He said he fears they may not be seeing as much science today as what they once did coming from their land-grant institutions. They may be turning to private consultants, crop consultants and agronomists to be able to access what they once got through the land-grant university, he said.

Novak said another thing that concerns him is how the next generation of scientists will be trained. He said everyone can talk about the innovations coming through private research, but if the nation doesn't have scientists who are trained at land-grant universities and equipped to be able to provide that type of research in the future, he wasn't certain what may happen to production agriculture.

One of the challenges to getting increased funding for agricultural research may be a misperception that research at land-grant universities is all about agricultural productivity. Novak said when national corn production was going to hit 15 billion bushels of corn annually and the challenge now is finding new demands for that increase. There will be those who ask why should we invest more in agricultural research and increase productivity. Novak said identifying topics that will connect not just with policymakers but also with consumers is needed to tell the story.

Akridge said over the last decade, the private sector investment in agriculture research has increased, both among food companies and input companies. But the public investment in agriculture research has declined substantially. In the mid-1970s, public investment was about \$4 billion. It trended up until about 2000 and now is back down to about \$4 billion. In addition, public agricultural research is spread over a broader range of issues, including environmental and natural resource issues, human nutrition and food safety, and economics and policy.

Akridge said companies are increasingly looking to acquire and develop technologies, rather than doing all the basic research. So they are looking to public universities to find that technology. In some cases, something a company may be commercializing started in a lab on a campus that came through federal funding for research.

Akridge said middle-income countries now spend more on public research than do higher wealth countries such as the United States. China and India have dramatically increased investments in agricultural research. Akridge said that raises questions about what this means for the U.S. agriculture sector and the countries the United States both trades with and competes against.

Three people representing groups involved in efforts to increase agricultural research funding also spoke.

Randy Russell, president of the Russell Group, talked about SoAR — Supporters of Agricultural Research. SoAR is a foundation established in 2014 to promote agriculture research and its benefits. Russell said despite multiple studies and combined efforts over many years, little progress has been made towards increased funding for agriculture research.

Russell said rather than continuing to simply push for an increase in federal spending, the focus should be on changing the culture. He said one step would be to provide some mandatory funding for USDA, rather than having most agriculture research dollars distributed via discretionary funding. Another would be to look at the way competitive grants are structured, both size and duration. Russell said changing the administrative structure of USDA also might be considered as one way to build confidence in an increased level of research support. For example, creating a director of research position who reports directly to the secretary, serves a set term and would be confirmed by the U. S. Senate; and also creation of deputy director positions for intramural research and extramural research.

In closing, Russell said he believed there was a real desire in the 2018 Farm Bill to take on agricultural research and to do it differently. To do that, he said many groups need to come together with a plan that is bold, new and with significant new funding attached.

Deb Atwood, executive director of AGree, described AGree as a “think tank/do tank.” Participants began by identifying eight initiatives to feed and transform the U.S. food and agriculture system in a nutritionally sustainable way looking out to 2030 and 2050.

Some recommendations:

- Scrutinize and modernize federal funding mechanisms for public research, education, and Extension to foster innovation and maximize public benefits related to health.
- Review and reset publicly funded research priorities periodically, employing a very robust, transparent process with input from multiple stakeholders and users to insure funds are focused on high impact areas.
- Minimize duplicative efforts and unnecessary costs.
- Target public research funding to areas that are unlikely to be addressed by the private industry.
- Increase Congressional oversight.
- Integrate research and education and extension activities to promote coordination across the interconnected elements of food and nutrition and health and economics.

In closing, Atwood said a great outline has been developed, about building a broader coalition. It takes resources and energy. Members have to commit that they are going to create a platform, meet on a regular basis and articulate where there is agreement on a series of requests to focus on for Congress and the Administration. Atwood said there’s great interest in people outside the food, agriculture and natural resources world who would be willing to step up to the challenge.

Andy LaVigne, National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (NC-FAR) board president, said NC-FAR was founded 12 years ago to advocate for increased funding for food and agriculture research. It includes about 58 member associations, professional societies, universities and others. One of the key things NC-FAR does is offer lunch-and-learn seminars for Congressional staff members. The hour-long seminars include conversations with farmers, university professors and others who can talk about agriculture and the importance of research. To date, 114 seminars have been held, with more than 7,800 staffers from both the U.S. House and Senate attending.

LaVigne said research is looking at topics no one ever thought about 30 years ago, but the same pot of money is going to a broader need. This discussion is about the next 20 years. He said the system is not going to be changed by the next Farm Bill; it's going to take 25 years to get to where it needs to be.

An afternoon guest speaker presented the USDA perspective on research of importance to commodity organizations. **Catherine Woteki**, USDA Under Secretary, Research, Education and Economics, said in 2012 an expert committee developed a report that stated the nation's current agricultural R&D system is not prepared to deal with the challenges facing agriculture. The report included two recommendations — a new innovation infrastructure for agricultural research, and an increased investment in agricultural research.

Woteki said the 150-year partnership between the USDA and land-grant universities is an important part of delivering science-based solutions for the various commodities in agriculture. Yet the agriculture research infrastructure is in decline, and she provided two specific measures to support that statement.

The first is the appropriations for agriculture research in inflation-adjusted dollars are now less than in 2010. The second indicator is size of the workforce with 3,000 fewer USDA scientists and support workers in agriculture research now than in 2009.

Woteki said a unified message is absolutely essential to address the fact the United States is not currently equipped to deal with the challenges facing agriculture. She said while some believe organizational changes are needed, she believes the problem is the decline of power in Congress from agricultural interests within the states.

What is needed, Woteki said, is to broaden engagement beyond the traditional appropriations committees that have the agriculture research within their purview. Engagement needs to be with urban and suburban interests, and lawmakers who represent those jurisdictions. They need to have an understanding of their reliance and dependence on an adequate, safe, health-promoting food supply. They need to understand that research also needs to help deliver all the environmental benefits that are expected of agriculture.

To lift the entire boat of agricultural research, and to have that engine working to address the concerns of many different groups, Woteki said a much broader engagement than is currently done will be required. It will not be just the rural lawmakers sitting on appropriations committees; it needs to be at a broader, higher level.

The following pages provide a summary of key points and comments made during the discussion sessions, followed by a listing of participants, observers and support staff.

Discussion

What are the benefits of participating in a unifying-message coalition in support of increased federal investment in agricultural research?

Strength in numbers. Having a broad coalition providing a unified message is respected in political circles. It demonstrates different groups worked together to develop a set of priorities. It also makes it possible to reach a much larger audience. Another benefit of a coalition is the ability to work together to determine the best time to deliver the unified message.

“We need to be able to reach a lot of constituencies, people from all walks of life, and the only way we’re going to do that is if we’re working together.”

Sharing common ground. The agriculture industry is made up of many segments, which represent a wide variety of crops, livestock and disciplines, yet those segments are very interdependent. Recognizing that interdependency, and getting buy-in from the various segments on a specific, targeted request is important. Bringing all these segments together under one umbrella, presenting a single message with a common voice, will have a greater impact. Also, a broad coalition supporting a narrow or singular goal of increasing funding for research builds alignment within individual groups, as well as the public. Another benefit is the knowledge and understanding others gain of the various groups. That understanding of each other’s perspectives is valuable.

“This is a big tent, and we’re going to do something bold that will benefit everybody. But not if we’re all fighting with sharp elbows just to get the table scraps.”

Broaden the scope. Taking a broad approach to developing a unifying message gives participants the opportunity to identify allies who haven’t been considered earlier that might support the effort. If the message continues to vary depending on the group presenting it, or there isn’t a new vision being offered with strong support from a larger coalition, agriculture research funding will continue to be trapped in the same cycle. Nutrition is a good example of a topic that could be linked with agriculture research, food research and solving societal problems. So a unified message that incorporates nutrition would bring new advocates to the table.

What’s the role of federal investment in agricultural research, and in what direction should that support be taking agriculture and society?

National concerns. Federal investment is critical for agricultural research, because the concerns facing agriculture are national in scope. There needs to be a national conversation about what the future holds for this country and the world, in terms of safe food, increased nutrition, renewable energy and more.

National advocacy. The federal government can play a greater role in being agriculture’s biggest and best advocate, not just U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) personnel, but from a much higher level within the administration. Federal funding comes with the responsibility of doing such things as communicating the benefits of agricultural technology, and heading off potential crisis related to emerging diseases or pests.

“The American public does not see an immediate need for more ag research. They’re not hungry. We need to develop a vision of how we can use resources more efficiently and leverage those resources long term.”

Public/private collaboration. Federal investment makes many public/

private partnerships possible, and increases investments in agriculture research. What drives many researchers and innovators in private laboratories is not profit, but rather their desire to find a solution to a public problem. The same is true in public university and research laboratories. A 2015 report showed a record \$25 billion for venture capital investment in agricultural technology, and that is expected to grow. This supports the idea that more public/private partnerships will continue to emerge as a result of federal funding.

Of the agencies that support food and agriculture research, what should the agenda be across agencies and what role could a unified message play?

Proactive stance. The natural tendency is to be reactive rather than proactive. Yet for agriculture in the United States, a proactive stance is needed. This requires a broad, far-reaching vision, across agencies. This vision must involve taking proactive steps to stop the next big livestock disease or crop blight that could devastate an entire agriculture production sector. Antimicrobial resistance – what does this mean to the average person? How might this impact them? It is critical for pressing threats to agriculture to be translated in a way the general public, and Congress, will understand.

Better communication. Improved communications will make immediate needs more relevant to Congress, while also better informing the general public. Interagency communication is a challenge by the very nature they're housed under different structures. Yet there needs to be better communication among the agencies internally, and they need to be empowered to share news of the good work they're doing externally. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy are among the agencies posting public-friendly science stories.

What level of federal investment is needed for agricultural research to address the grand challenges ahead?

Aim high. Many different ways of determining an appropriate investment level have been discussed. One component needs to be the deferred maintenance of facilities nationwide where agriculture research and education is done. Then add in funding to conduct both short-term and long-term research, plus educate a talented workforce. Pick a big, compelling issue or issues that many constituencies can get behind.

Consider doubling. One fairly common goal mentioned is to double the current level of federal funding for agriculture research. The development of overarching goals and messaging is needed to justify this doubling. This could include an examination of extramural competitive grants and increasing efficiencies. The perception must be enhanced that federal funding is well spent and has a high return on investment, creating the foundation for future increases in spending on agricultural research.

What do you see as the major barriers from participation in such a diverse coalition? What questions should be addressed?

Political chips. Agriculture groups have a limited number of political chips to play, coupled with many differing priorities. Yet a unified message will make it possible for these diverse groups to unite without using up all their political chips. It also spreads the heavy lifting across many organizations. Groups can participate using varying degrees of political muscle.

Shifting the message. For agriculture groups to get behind a unifying message, there needs to be a recognition that a different perspective on funding is needed. Historically, the research objective is almost always framed to the advantage of an individual commodity group. Where is the message on the public benefit? The National Institutes of Health (NIH)

“The level of effort is a barrier, but creating a coalition is one way to abrogate that barrier, because each of us can contribute a certain amount and aggregate. That’s where we have the strength and the ability to overcome resource limitations.”

model and message is about leveraging public sector dollars with private sector dollars, and weaving in the public benefit. Also, taxpayers always want to know they are getting the best bang for their buck.

Questions need answers. Overproduction in some segments of the U.S. agricultural system results in questions about why additional research is needed when surplus commodities exist. And since Americans don't see any food shortages in their local grocery store, they don't see the need for more research. A better connection needs to be made between agriculture research and an abundant food supply.

Listen to our customers. One barrier for agriculture may be not listening to consumers often enough. Some initial research done by the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance showed consumers react negatively to the words safe, abundant and affordable. These words have been used extensively to promote the benefits of agriculture technology and agriculture research. It's time to find new ways to talk to both consumers and Congress about these issues.

“A unified effort is a way for all of us to participate. We can participate in varying degrees. Creating a coalition is one way to overcome barriers because each organization can contribute a certain amount and aggregate. That's where we have the strength and the ability to overcome resource limitations.”

What are some common themes in a unifying message?

Make a human connection. One reason the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding has increased significantly over the past two decades is because there's an immediate connection for individuals to things such as cancer. A unifying message needs to do a better job of talking about the human benefits of past, present and future agriculture research projects. And yet the message needs to be simple, precise and focused on the public good.

Identify the issues. Develop a blueprint for U.S. agriculture so future research needs, capacity, and funding matches. Identify the big issues, then show ways big funding will bring transformational results, even to the point of repositioning the way agricultural commodities are viewed in the United States. Be forward thinking. For instance, consider the issues of water quality, greenhouse gas reductions and sequestration. Think about the value of these ecosystem services, which might help to redefine some of the research. Some of these research requests could be defined by additional societal benefits, rather than just producing food. It's the idea that captivates the imagination, it's the next challenge, it's how emerging, infectious diseases in agriculture are addressed.

“I think the public perception is that agriculture has been the problem [not the solution]. . . . The point we've got to get across is that ag research is going to have to solve the problems.”

Working together. Collaborations – universities working together, public and private researchers working together, scientists from different disciplines working together – these are messages that are well received in Congress. The unifying message needs to embrace additional stakeholders beyond the traditional. The traditional farm organizations and land-grant institutions will be there. Then various food and fiber and renewable energy industries need to be added, plus the environmental community, and the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines. In addition, join with SoAR, AGrEE, NC-FAR and others also working to increase funding for agriculture research.

“There are people in power who don't get out of the city and who think the world is crumbling. There are many solutions that farmers are providing, or can provide. It's getting that message out and showing the value of that research.”

Public/private intersect. Identify that place where the public good and the private sector intersect. Agriculture needs to take a broader view of the research program in the United States than just its own interests. One concept is innovation institutes that would be public/private partnerships, and focused on things such as the microbiome, plants, animals and humans — where the food system/microbiome all comes together. If scientists integrate the plant, animal and human nutrition aspects of microbiome research, and work closely with the private sector, the result could be greater innovations and faster payoffs.

Review the federal-state research enterprise. The land-grant university system, in partnership with the USDA, has been integral to the success of U.S. agriculture, and will continue to be into the future. But a review of the system should include whether some programs could be regionalized instead of separate in every state; how can we take better advantage of some long-term USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) laboratories within the land-grant university system; and examine what the ARS of the future looks like. These types of discussions are needed to inform the partnership of the future, and how to transition from where it is now to where it needs to be in 25 years.

“We need to relate food security with global security. If we can produce enough food along with other emerging economies, this will help move us all towards greater global security.”

Participants

Jay Akridge, Glenn W. Sample Dean of Agriculture, College of Agriculture, Purdue University (presenter)

Danielle Beck, Director of Government Affairs, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Greg Bohach, Vice President, Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine, Mississippi State University

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Colin Woodall, Vice President, Government Affairs, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Catherine Woteki, U.S. Department of Agriculture Chief Scientist and Under Secretary, Research, Education, and Economics (presenter)

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