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MEETING AGRICULTURE'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES: AGRIBUSINESS'S ROLE

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Agriculture has always been a business full of challenges and gambles. A look at today's producers and the choices they have with new technology, unknowns in the weather, etc., quickly points out that the questions are not becoming fewer or any easier to answer. At the same time producers try to make the correct production and marketing decisions, most try to balance these economic interests with environmental and farm improvement goals. Today's Iowa farmers have environmental issues facing them related to the 1985 and 1990 Farm Bills, the Clean Water Act, etc. Presently, Americans of all walks of life, including farmers, are growing more concerned about our environment, the safety of our food supply and many other issues that will affect farmers directly. What new environmental issues will the 1995 Farm Bill and the Clean Water Act reauthorization bring? How can farmers continue to raise more bushels of corn and soybeans? Will commodity prices go up or will farmers have to learn ways to cut costs, or both? The real challenge is that all these issues are interrelated. The answer to this complex equation comes in total resource management which will have to blend the best of crop production practices with resource conservation for a profitable, sustainable, environmentally sound farm.

So far, I have led you to believe that each day farmers will be greeted with more questions, options and challenges. It is true that more and more issues will develop each day, but the idea that they will only face farmers is very untrue. These issues will face ALL OF US IN AGRICULTURE and will take AGRICULTURE WORKING AS A TEAM to solve them.

Each of you is an important player on this "Agricultural Team". Whether you are a researcher, in information and education, helping farmers manage their business, or selling agricultural products, you have a role to play.

To demonstrate the important role you each play, you just need to look at where farmers go for information and the value they place on that information.

* In 1991, nearly 2000 Iowa farmers were interviewed and asked whom they would consult before changing tillage systems. Eighty-four percent said they would likely consult their local chemical, fertilizer dealer. The only group that would be used more often was other experienced farmers.
* In 1992, farmers across Iowa were asked what the value was of information they received from chemical/fertilizer dealers and manufacturers. Eighty-five percent of the farmers polled said the information was of great or moderate value.

Everything points to the fact that if you are involved in agriculture, in whatever area, you will be called on as part of the Agricultural Team to help solve the challenges. Your future will depend on how well you fill this role.

The next logical question is what can you do to be a successful part of the Team.

* First and foremost, get to know the other Team members in your area; not just your fellow dealers or representatives but your local conservationists, extension agent, experienced farmers, representatives of commodity groups and farm organizations and all the others.
* Stay abreast of all the current issues facing the farmers in your area. What are their production problems, economic challenges (costs of production, manpower, time) and the environmental issues that they face?
* Look for ways that you can help solve these challenges. The issues are complex so work with other Team members on integrated answers.
* Be an active part of the team to promote, educate and assist producers to apply these solutions. Remember that part of these solutions may be providing services and not just selling products.

Next is my challenge to you: Are you an active member of the Agricultural Team?

* Do you know your local conservationists, extension agent, ag. bankers, dealers on a first name basis?
* Do you know that more than half of Iowa’s farmers have to have a conservation plan fully applied on their highly erodible cropland this next year to remain eligible for most USDA farm programs?
* Did you know one of our most common corn herbicides has new label restrictions related to use rates, crop residue levels, and where it can be applied near surface water?
* Were you aware that one cooperator adjusted fertilizer P and K rates downward on high testing fields, resulting in a reduction of fertilizer costs from $7,650 in 1989 and to $2,580 in 1990 on 500 acres?
* Do you know that when anyone applies restricted use pesticides, they must keep detailed records?
* Are you aware of the Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) program? Are you going to become part of this program?
* Did you know that many experts estimate that 10-25 percent of Iowa’s farmers are struggling financially?
* Did you know that the average Iowa farm size increases about 10 percent each year and we lose approximately 1000 Iowa farmers annually?
* Did you know soon we will be farming by the acre, changing fertilizer rates on the go, spraying different chemical in different parts of the field with the use of global positioning systems?
* Did you realize that in one location a scout discovered a severe lambsquarter infestation in a 63 acre oat field with an alfalfa seeding. The farmer had the field sprayed with buctril and obtained excellent control. A check strip was left and in that strip one of the alfalfa seedlings survived and the oats suffered also. The farmers net income was $4,250 higher than it would have been without treatment?
* Did you know that Iowa farmers are using no-till farming methods on 5 times the land they did just 3 years ago?

If you were aware of a majority of these trends and challenges, congratulations, but know you will have to continue to work hard to stay on top of everything affecting agriculture. If some of these items surprised you, you're not alone. Agriculture is changing rapidly, and it is not easy to be aware of all the issues. But our customers, Iowa’s farmers, expect it and you nor I can’t afford to be left behind. This is the future of agriculture and by working as part of the Agricultural Team is the best way to ensure that agriculture is part of your future.

I would like to end with an offer to you. The Soil Conservation Service is committed to helping agriculture work together as a team. Introduce yourself to your local SCS conservationist and the other members of the Team, focus on the issues facing your customers and work toward solutions that will help Iowa farmers meet these challenges. Each of us has to make this commitment. By working together as a team we will be able to make agriculture stronger and we will be able to respond to the challenges voluntarily. This is not a time for us to be ostriches. Ignoring the issues of tomorrow would be a bad business decision for all of us. We must work together, meet the challenges head on, and move forward.