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Meet the Staff: David Hennessy

Professor David Hennessy joined the faculty at the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) in the summer of 2001 to provide research on industrialization in agriculture and the role of information in farm-level production decisions and in the provision of safe food. His research also investigates systemic risks in the agricultural sector.

Having received his Ph.D. in agricultural economics at Iowa State University in 1993, he returned to his alma mater as an assistant professor in 1996. David spent the intervening years as an agricultural economist and assistant professor at Washington State University, a time he remembers fondly as having provided him with “a lot of perspective on the profession and on academia in general.”

David’s career in agricultural economics began in his native Ireland at the University College Dublin, National University of Ireland. From a young age, he was interested in organization, in how things function—or don’t function. “It seemed to me to be amazing that the world worked at all when no one seemed to know much beyond an operational level about how things, in general, worked.” He decided to study agricultural economics because it addresses the issues that are important to rural communities and to farmers, like his father, who still farms part-time.

The autonomy of the farming lifestyle was something David always appreciated, and after 15 months working for the Irish government, he left Ireland for the greater freedom of academic pursuits, enrolling at Iowa State. Along with his father, his mother, two brothers, one sister, two nieces, and two nephews reside in Ireland.

David says he joined CARD because “it is the premier agricultural and natural resources academic research center at a land grant university.” “It has managed to achieve, on a continuing basis,” he says, “the difficult task of combining innovative research with a program of contribution to current and pending policy debates.”

David’s most recent research at CARD explores food production systems that involve many interacting stages and two or more decision makers. He and his co-authors found that leadership by one or more firms in communicating about various actions throughout the production process could bring about an increase in overall food quality. The study suggests that strict control of inputs can raise quality levels of products; however, in practice, many inputs may be difficult for firms to regulate. In addition, the authors conclude that because there may be no private incentive for firms to take a leadership role, ultimate liability for breakdowns in a food system may have to be assigned through legislative action.

The Iowa State University College of Agriculture awarded the “Early Achievement in Research” distinction to David for the 1999-2000 academic year. His research is often published in the most prominent professional journals. In addition to his research efforts, he teaches courses in commodity market analysis, business economics, agribusiness management, demand and supply systems, and decision analysis. When he’s not busy with the demands of teaching and research, he fills his recreational time with running, walking, swimming, reading, and movies.

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Entiation is achieved through the sorting of commodity beef for different overall values rather than the production of a non-commodity product. Most U.S. customers are satisfied with the existing commodity system, and risk-averse producers are reluctant to adopt and/or document production practices that increase cost without some assurance of higher revenues in return. Processors continue to rely on post-harvest treatment of commodity beef to add value by sorting, packaging, preparing, or advertising for changing consumer needs. They need only a safe raw product.

Slowly, and from a small base, some individual supply chains in the United States are breaking away from the commodity model. Perhaps the closest system the United States has to the Australian system is the USDA Process-Verified Beef program. Currently, the program is not widely used but it could be adopted by several supply chains. New differentiated supply chains are focusing on production practices (“natural,” for example) or genetics and may require additional documentation. Likewise, export markets may require additional information about products before they allow access. These changes may provide U.S. producers with economic incentives to follow the lead of Australian and New Zealand systems.

John Lawrence is a livestock economist and director of the Iowa Beef Center at Iowa State University. More information about the Iowa Beef Center is available at www.iowabeefcenter.org.