

Breaking the technology treadmill through long-term research

Agricultural researchers are becoming just like farmers; they are starting to feel the cash crunch of reduced government spending. As a result of a shortage of funds, many institutions have been forced into matching funding programs with industry. Particularly hard hit has been long-term research. It has largely been replaced by short-term, contract research, much of which is focused on trials testing the matching funder's new product or method.

This should be seen as a disturbing situation for Canadian farmers. Firstly, short-term research inevitably comes up with a product that farmers then have to buy. Farmers will always have to buy inputs of some kind but what they really need is complementary information and strategies for improved crop and livestock management. A good example of the need for long-term research is highlighted in this issue by the conversion project at the Rodale Research centre. In the short term the low input systems performed relatively poorly but in the long-term these same systems appear to be outperforming conventional management systems. There is so much about soil fertility and animal physiology that we have yet to understand, that before we can devise appropriate strategies we need to understand what we are working with. In other words, we may be spending too much time trying to build a better mouse trap while not concentrating on why the mouse is a problem in the first place.

Where should farmers turn for a higher level of commitment to research that benefits farmers ?

One idea is a research check-off to be levied on commodities on a national basis. While a good idea in theory, it may prove to be very difficult to carry-out across the board. Farmers are already in danger of becoming 'check-offed out', with levies for political organizations and marketing boards already taking priority from scarce farmer funds. The other major problem with these specialized commodity groups is that because the research is so commodity oriented the scope of the research will be limited and a reductionist approach to solving the problem will evolve. Where a few programs have joint commodity group funding and government support working together (such as Ontario's Pest Management 2002 program) a two year proposal is now considered too long a time frame. The program itself may be a 15 year program but researchers are focussed on short term 'magic bullet' research. Although the program on paper appears to have a long term vision, the end result is maintaining the technology treadmill.

Some farm organizations recognize that current research isn't adequately meeting their direct needs and are trying to do something about it. The Federation des producteurs des Bovins du Quebec has been called upon by its membership to look into the possibility of establishing a research fund supported, in a yet to be specified way, by Quebec beef producers. The California Certified Organic Farmers have recently established a sister organization, the Organic Farming Research Foundation, to respond to the continual cry for better information and research in organic methods. A necessary corollary to the foundation idea is government support through tax measures; those farmers who have the initiative to improve their own lot by contributing to research receive an appropriate incentive and those who just reap the benefits will pay indirectly through their taxes.

If farmers are to be served better by the research community in the future they need to take a more active role. One way farmers could have a greater say in research is by being directly involved in the review of research projects (rather than just leaving the decision to researchers or bureaucrats). It is ultimately the farmers that are the real victims of the poor review process which exists in some parts of the country.

Another option that would be particularly effective in making researchers and institutions more responsive to farmers needs would be to allocate a certain amount of money per year (perhaps \$200/year initially) to each farmer who in turn would allocate it to the institution or organization of his/her choice. The money would come from a reallocation of existing research funds. This would provide the ultimate democratization of the agricultural research process. The institution could best decide where it wanted to spend the research funding (i.e. long term research becomes viable if desired). The farmer would have a say as to where the research money was going and would likely take a greater interest in the results generated. This process would likely stimulate competitiveness in the research process and dialogue between the farm and research communities. The end result would be to encourage lower cost research approaches such as participatory on-farm research that involve farmers.

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