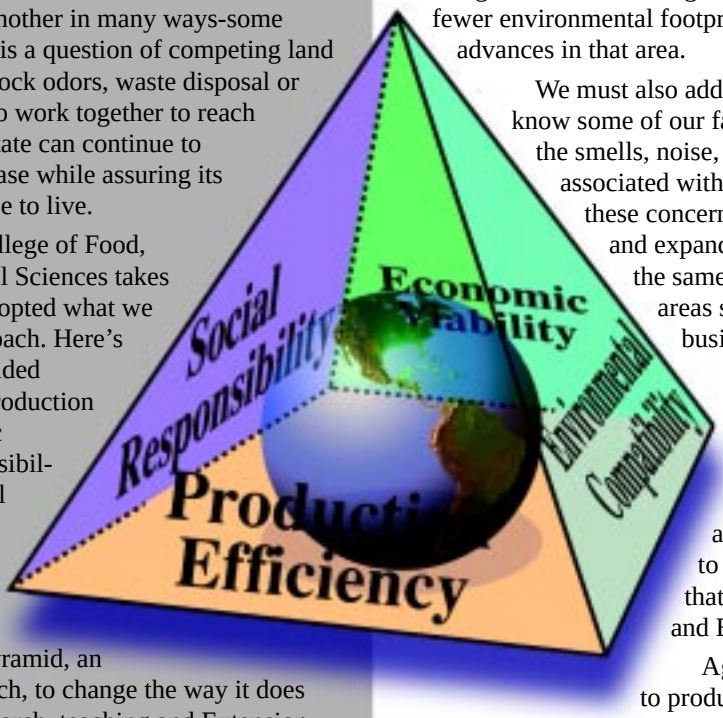
An Agricultural Call to Arms: Addressing Society's Concerns

by Bobby D. Moser, Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Dean, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Today's agriculture requires as much attention to the environment and society as to yields and the bottom line. This does matter as much to farmers as it does to the general public.

In Ohio, with 11 million people and food and agriculture the number one industry at $70 billion, rural and urban interests brush up against one another in many ways-some resulting in friction. Whether it is a question of competing land use, urban encroachment, livestock odors, waste disposal or clean water, both sectors need to work together to reach amicable solutions so that the state can continue to maintain a strong agricultural base while assuring its citizens a pleasant and safe place to live.

Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences takes this issue seriously. We have adopted what we call an integrated systems approach. Here's how it works: Think of a four-sided pyramid. One side represents production efficiency, the second economic viability, the third social responsibility and the fourth environmental compatibility. These sides together form a structure with a programmatic strength greater than if they stood alone.



Our college is using this pyramid, an ecological food systems approach, to change the way it does business. As we embark on research, teaching and Extension, we now ask ourselves four questions: Is it economically viable? Is it efficiently productive? Is it environmentally sound? Will society accept it? The future of Ohio very much depends upon recognizing the relationship between agriculture and ecological sustainability and environmental "health." Our quality of life depends on this relationship.

There have been periods in our history when farming-with the noble goal of feeding the world-planted fence row to fence row and relied on herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers to maximize yields. We placed most of our emphasis on production and economics and not enough on the environment or social concerns.

When we learned that some practices had environmental repercussions, we embraced soil conservation practices, minimum tillage, crop varieties that require fewer chemical inputs and precision farming technology. Using satellite technology, infrared photography and computers with the familiar tools of soil testing, field scouting and yield analysis, farmers can apply chemicals precisely only where and when they are needed. Applying the correct amount will save farmers money and minimize the potential for leakages to the environment.

Agriculture is learning to step lightly on the land, to leave fewer environmental footprints. We will continue to make advances in that area.

We must also address society's concerns. We know some of our farm neighbors are bothered by the smells, noise, flies or equipment traffic associated with larger farms. We must take these concerns into account when locating and expanding agricultural enterprises. At the same time, people relocating to rural areas should be aware of normal business procedures of farming.

Many farms have adopted good neighbor policies; I applaud the Ohio Livestock Coalition and other farm organizations that have encouraged this and urge more farmers to embrace this approach. I pledge that Ohio State will expand research and Extension efforts in these areas.

Agriculture has a moral obligation to produce a safe and abundant food supply for the United States and the world. But in so doing, we must take into account our impact on communities and the environment.

Our college mirrors well the mission and vision of the land grant, public-serving university. We generate new knowledge through research and transfer this unbiased, research-based information to the citizens of Ohio through Ohio State University Extension. We prepare the next generation of workers, managers and leaders through our academic programs.

This is a formidable challenge. As a college, we can't do it alone. We ask for public understanding as we work through this new concept. We welcome partnerships from farm commodity organizations, business and industry, environmental organizations, governmental agencies and anyone who strongly agrees that we must work together to find acceptable solutions to tough issues that must be addressed early in this century.

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