

Editorial

Education is reason for the progress in U.S ag since Khrushchev visit

BY DIRCK STEIMEL

Iowa agriculture undoubtedly looked pretty impressive last week to the Russian delegation visiting Iowa to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's famous 1959 visit to the Roswell Garst farm in Coon Rapids.



LASLEY

Agriculture in the United States was the envy of the world, when Khrushchev came to Iowa. And it's even more impressive today, piling up production gains year after year that are nothing short of breathtaking.

Just take a quick look at the prospects for this year's Iowa crops.

Despite cool temperatures and some battering hail damage, this fall's Iowa average corn yield is projected at a record 185 bushels an acre. That's nearly three times the 66-bushel average farmers hauled home in 1959.

This year's average soybean yield is projected at 55 bushels an acre in 2009, more than double the 26.5 bushel average 50 years ago.

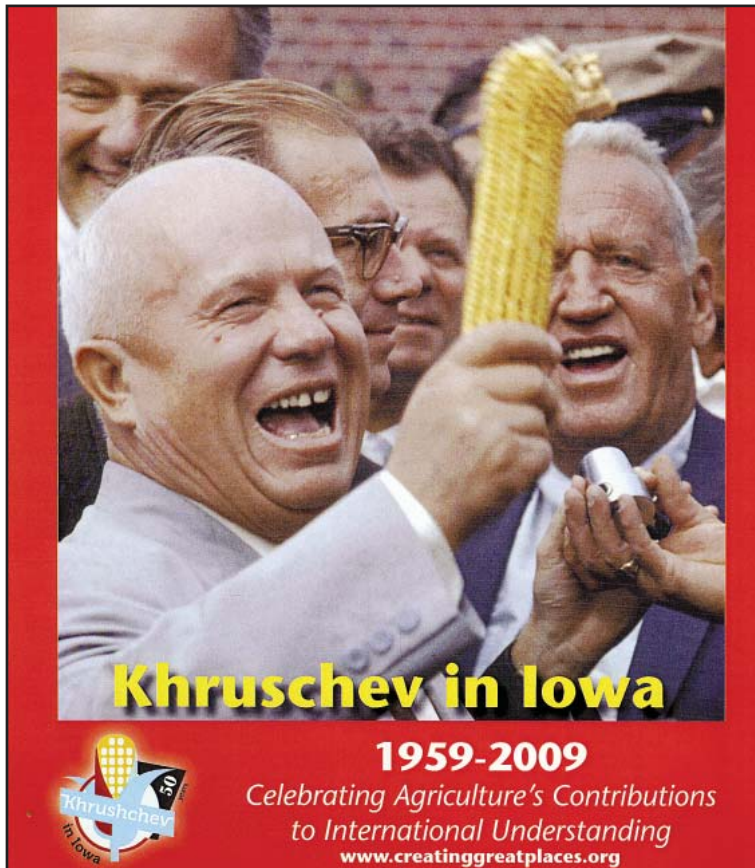
Similarly, Iowa's production of meat, milk and eggs today is off the charts when compared to 1959, and the state also leads the nation in production of biofuels from corn and soybeans, something not even on the radar five decades ago.

Culture of learning

Yet production statistics can't show the biggest change—and most impressive advancement—in Iowa agriculture since 1959, according to a veteran observer of changes in Iowa's farm and rural life.

The biggest difference, said Paul Lasley, a sociology professor at Iowa State University (ISU), is the education and knowledge base of today's farmers. "The rising education level is really the most fundamental change that we've seen in farming over the years," he said.

Agriculture has evolved into a



high-tech, science-based business that demands a strong educational foundation, Lasley said.

To keep pace with the changes in technology, farmers in Iowa and other states have flexed their brainpower. They have worked to become far more educated than their predecessors in a wide range of critical areas, such as soil fertility, conservation methods, seed

technology, integrated pest management, animal nutrition and marketing.

And they aren't resting. Farmers keep honing skills to learn about new technologies and techniques. "There is really just a whole learning mindset in agriculture today," Lasley noted.

The educational process in today's agriculture starts with

young people's participation in 4-H and FFA and never really stops, the ISU professor noted. It goes through high school, community colleges and land-grant colleges, like ISU, and on through educational seminars offered by Cooperative Extension and others, he said.

That push for knowledge has helped provide American agriculture "a huge competitive advantage over the years," Lasley said.

Farmers in other countries may use genetically-modified seeds, GPS-guided machinery and other high-tech tools that are continually transforming agriculture and increasing production. But the United States has the deep knowledge base that makes those tools work more effectively, Lasley said.

"Others can buy the technology, but often they don't have the knowledge to integrate it into the agricultural production and handling systems," Lasley said. "The technology is great, but you have to be able to link it all together."

The push by farmers to know more has also paid off in conservation gains. Farmers across the United States have produced more food while they have learned ways to reduce agriculture's impact on the environment, Lasley said.

"It's really the intellectual capacity of farmers that has made this all possible," Lasley concluded.



Attacks show need for farmers to communicate

BY DIRCK STEIMEL

The one-sided attacks on modern American agriculture in the media keep on coming.

The latest is a Time magazine cover story titled "Getting Real About the High Price of Cheap Food." The writer makes absolutely no attempt to be objective as he viciously attacks modern farming, repeating a long list of false criticisms. He also fails to mention that today's farmers have provided Americans with the world's most abundant, safest and most affordable food supply.

Sadly, the attack in Time magazine is not an isolated occurrence. It's part of a wave of broadsides, including those made in a full-length movie called "Food Inc." Scratch the surface a bit, and you'll find the fingerprints of many well-funded activist groups targeting modern farming methods.

Telling the real story

So what can farmers do to counter this surge of unfair criticism?

One answer is to start talking with people in your own community. Take time to visit with folks at the local grocery store. Speak up at church. Get active with your county Farm Bureau, and volunteer to speak at a local civic club.

It's important to let folks know that farmers take good care of their livestock because it's the right thing to do. Point out that farmers clearly care about the environment because their families live on the land, drink the water and breathe the air.

Most of all, describe the pride that farmers share in producing wholesome, safe and affordable food.

Some in agriculture may question whether it does any good for farmers to speak up in their own communities. Don't folks in rural Iowa already know about agriculture? You might be surprised by the answer.

Many rural communities are not as connected to agriculture as they once were. Many in town see that farms look different than they once did and may not know why. They don't understand that market forces, like those affecting the structure of many other businesses, are constantly pushing farmers to make their operations larger and more efficient.

But that doesn't mean they care less about producing safe food or caring for the environment.

Bottom line, it's up to farmers to tell the real story of modern farming and hometowns are a great place to start.

Soviet system was root of food problems

Food security was a major goal of Nikita Khrushchev when he traveled to Iowa 50 years ago.

Faced with chronic food shortages and unrest in the Soviet Union, Khrushchev came to Roswell Garst's farm in Coon Rapids to get a first-hand look at farming in the American Heartland. In particular, the Soviet leader was interested in U.S. corn.

The adoption of hybrids, which were championed by Garst and others, helped to revolutionize farming in the United States in the middle of the 20th Century and caught Khrushchev's attention. Earlier, the Soviet leader expressed his dream of establishing an Iowa-like Corn Belt in the Soviet Union, and he thought that hybrids might help to accomplish that.

While hybrid technology was a true breakthrough, the roots of the Soviet Union's food-production issues went a lot deeper than just adopting an Iowa type of corn, said Paul Lasley, a sociology professor at Iowa State University (ISU). The Soviet's problems, he said, stemmed more from the

country's collective farming system.

Farmers in Iowa, and all over the United States, have readily adopted new technologies, like hybrids, because they could see the benefits in bigger harvests and higher incomes, Lasley said. "There has been an economic incentive here to take a risk."

Conversely, in the Soviet Union's collective farm system, there was no incentive to adopt new technology, Lasley noted. It was a system where the state made all of the decisions and individual farmers had no incentive to improve production, he said.

That often left the country's agriculture mired in the past and unable to consistently feed its people.

The breakup of the Soviet Union has made it difficult to make direct comparisons between the agricultural gains in the two countries.

But in the past 50 years, while U.S. agricultural production has soared, output in Russia and other former Soviet states has not kept pace, Lasley noted. "Russia has made significant progress, but in no way has it caught up."

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A documentary called “Death on a Factory Farm” that premiered last week on HBO shows actions at a hog farm that are not condoned and, in fact, are abhorred by responsible pork producers, the National Pork Producers Council said last week.

The documentary includes undercover video taken at an Ohio hog farm showing piglets and sows being injured and killed by beating and hanging and covers the owner’s trial on cruelty charges.

The NPPC notes that it publicly condemned the mistreatment depicted in the documentary when it occurred in 2006.

“For the documentary’s producers to imply the situation shown in the film is in any way typical of swine husbandry in this country is grossly unfair to the farm families who work daily to feed this country and much of the world,” the NPPC said.

“Providing humane and compassionate care for their pigs at every stage of life is one of the ethical principles to which responsible pork producers adhere. The mistreatment shown in the HBO documentary does not reflect the practices the pork industry follows in caring for its animals. Mistreatment of animals is appalling to pork producers just as it is to others. We do not defend and will not accept such mistreatment.”

At the NPPC’s annual meeting earlier this month, pork producers adopted policies reaffirming their strong support for the well-being of animals, saying “any willful mistreatment or neglect of animals is unacceptable; pork producers do not and will not defend those who choose to participate in the mistreatment of animals.”

Powerful images

Video is one of the most powerful tools used by animal rights groups, said Aaron Putze, executive director of the Coalition to Support Iowa’s Farmers. Disturbing images of alleged animal cruelty—whether legitimate, staged or misleading—evoke strong emotions and are effective in using rare instances of abuse to defame an entire industry, he pointed out.

“Perception is reality, and it is imperative that those involved in farming and animal agriculture correct misleading information,” Putze said. “As with any conversations you have about agriculture and livestock, hog and poultry farming, it’s important that you communicate from the heart—that you share your values and your disgust about those who don’t share them.”

The NPPC shared the same sentiments, noting that no one has more on the line when it comes to responsible and ethical animal production than U.S. pork producers.

The pork industry has launched an initiative called “We Care” to promote the industry’s long-standing commitment to responsibility and improvement. A Statement of Ethical Principles and implementation of industry programs such as Pork Quality Assurance Plus (PQA Plus) and Transport Quality Assurance (TQA) are critical first steps in the “We Care” initiative. These care and handling education-certification programs for producers and their employees teach “Good Production Practices” for proper pig handling and transport.

“The ‘We Care’ initiative demonstrates to our customers and to the public that our responsible pork producers are dedicated to the production of safe, wholesome food,” the NPPC said.

Farm families are committed to providing for the well-being of their livestock and would not be involved in agriculture if they didn’t provide their livestock with a safe and healthy environment in which to grow, Putze added.

“The actions of a few ‘bad actors’ are in no way a reflection of the high standards demonstrated daily by America’s farmers and ranchers,” he said.

