

AL FOOD PRODUCTION

Food-sector uncertainties

The world's agricultural production is facing tremendous challenges that are likely to grow in coming decades. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln agronomy professor and several others of food production recently analyzed trends for the New York Times. Challenges are daunting, but they can be met by producers, ag-sector corporations, non-profits and governments make sound decisions. The University of Nebraska is positioned to contribute in major ways to the world's food production.

Economist Kenneth G. Cassman pointed out trends that are producing "an abrupt transition to a world where grain production exceeded one in which production capacity is not met." These changes, he said, "have flown under the radar."

First involves the speed of economic development in the world's most populous countries, such as China and India. The second trend, he said, is that old gains have slowed and grain yields have declined for a large portion of the global grain supply.

The third he identified as "a substantial decline in funding of research to enhance yields by means other than biotechnology."

Need of population growth and development in the world's most urban-oriented and prosperous economies proliferate, higher incomes result in higher per capita food consumption. It also means meat consumption, which suggests that grain production will have to increase to meet the needs of a growing world population.

For example, in Japan. Eighty years ago the average diet contained only modest amounts of meat. Japan's extraordinary economic surge after World War II, the country saw a dramatic increase in meat consumption. It is a common pattern as nations develop.

In the first time in history, more people now live in urban rather than rural environments. Each year the global population grows by 6 million to 8 million. By 2050, the 7 billion human beings on the planet today are expected to increase to a global population of 9 billion.

Another suggestion that yields of both grains and livestock in general crop have slowed or stalled in the world may be a correct generalization. In the United States, for instance, the average corn yield is 154.3 bushels an acre in 2010, down from 161 bushels an acre in 2009 in large part because of drought. Yield factors — weather, for instance, and soil — are highly variable.

Early estimates by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggest that farmers will devote 92 million acres to corn this year, compared with 88 million acres last year, potentially increasing supply.

Monsanto and its partner, BASF, are working on drought-tolerant corn seeds that could be used in 2012; the companies suggested that the world mean yields of six percent to 10 percent and that is only one commercial partnership seed characteristic.

Universities, researchers and many others also working on grains to improve yield and quality. Which brings on Cassman's third point: There has been a substantial decrease in funding for research in areas other than biotechnology. The reason may be that biotechnology of the quickest, most promising results.

It doesn't mean there is no research at all. It is testing conventionally bred drought-tolerant crops across the western Great Plains; the seeds use yields by 6 percent. And Syngenta is also testing conventional, water-saving seeds, suggesting that the product would be able to increase yields 10 percent.

Additionally, an African research center has reproduced experimental seed types with up to 50 percent higher than other African varieties under drought and nitrogen stress.



THE PUBLIC PULSE

Keep road budget on right path

The Nebraska Department of Roads is clamoring that it needs more money to develop and maintain the state's roads. This is the typical solution with government — always more money.

Hence, Legislative Bill 84, in which we would fund some road maintenance from the general fund.

Once the \$125 million is removed from the general fund, those whose budgets were cut would scream that they can't get along without that money, and state senators would be faced with raising taxes to replace the \$125 million given to the Roads Department, thus repeating the cycle.

Let's try a different approach. Senators should bracket LB 84 with the understanding that it will come back up for a vote next year.

In the meantime, let's authorize State Auditor Mike Foley to "open the window" a bit and audit the Department of Roads to see how the millions of dollars it currently receives are being spent and how those expenditures compare with surrounding states' cost per mile — specifically looking at the overhead of the department.

We common folks can't just go to our employer and say, "I need more money," and expect to get it. Maybe the Department of Roads could take a lesson from the common folks and figure out how to cut the fat.

Why isn't ObamaCare for all?

I can appreciate Jake Thompson, communications director for U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Nebraska, trying to paint a positive picture of Sen. Nelson's support for ObamaCare (March 31 Pulse).

I am sure there are some positives, but if ObamaCare is so good, why did Sen. Nelson's vote have to be bought with the "Cornhusker Kickback"?

If ObamaCare is so good, why has the administration had to grant more than 1,000 waivers so a chosen few don't have to participate?

If it is so good, why is U.S. Rep. Anthony D. Weiner, D-N.Y. — one of ObamaCare's staunchest supporters — seeking a special cost-saving regulatory exemption for New York City?

UNO has changed but still here

I have been following the loss of the football and wrestling programs at UNO with genuine sadness and sympathy for the participants, coaches and fans.

TO WRITE TO THE OPINION PAGES

Letters must include the writer's first and last names as well as the writer's address and telephone number. (Addresses and phone numbers are not published.) Letters written anonymously or with pseudonyms will not be printed. Letters must be the original words of the writer and may be edited for reasons including taste, accuracy, clarity and length. We will not knowingly print letters sent to other publications. Materials submitted to the Pulse or More Commentary page may be reproduced or distributed by print, digital or other means.

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though the Big Ten had recently decided to add hockey as a conference sport, NU would not be creating a team of its own, thus ensuring that the UNO Mavericks will remain the only Division I hockey program in the state.

Coincidence?

Jeff Kupfer, La Vista

Coach shows how to be a winner

On March 30, UNO wrestling coach Mike Denney spoke to roughly 300 high school hockey players and parents at the UNO Hockey Club's annual high school banquet.

Coach Denney told the young men and women about the achievements that come with hard work, discipline, dedication and character. He further advised about what it takes to weather adversity.

Faith, family and character are key to having a core foundation to stand on, he said. It's a foundation to face any challenge and to be challenged with mutual respect.

As a coach, Denney knows what it takes to inspire, motivate and challenge young people to give their best. His record reflects that soundly. Coach Denney is a class act.

John Byrnes, Omaha

Sokol part of Wall Street doubt

I find it ironic that prominent Omahan David Sokol has now become the poster boy for why a majority of Americans have such negative opinions about Wall Street.

Based on his stock dealings, Sokol appears not to have developed a conscience representing a mature adult.

couraging business formation and employment — through new jobs — in Nebraska. Quick, simple and economically very efficient. But possibly too transparent for the Legislature?

William H. Fleming, M.D., Bennington

Health centers fear budget cuts

As executive director of the Council Bluffs Community Health Center, which employs a staff of 34 and cared for 6,465 patients in 2010, I would like to enlighten Congress on the potential impact of the House-proposed fiscal year 2011 budget cuts to our health center and other federally qualified health centers.

The Council Bluffs Community Health Center sees an average of 200 new patients a month. The impact of a loss of funding would mean that the center would lose the ability to serve an additional 1,500 patients annually.

The demand for health care would not go away but, rather, would lead to wasteful, unnecessary health care spending, as Iowans would be left with no other alternative but to seek care in an inappropriate, more costly setting such as a hospital emergency room.

The cost of an emergency room visit is three times that of a visit to a community health center. It's a cost that our communities and the State of Iowa cannot afford.

As the House and Senate deliberate on remaining 2011 appropriations, our community must make it clear that losing any community health center funding would be detrimental to providers of health care, to our patients and to the entire community.

Cecelia Creighton, Council Bluffs

Clear facts send clear message

When is a legislative bill a true win for Nebraska? When it has the potential to save the lives of those we love.

I lost a family member to a tobacco-related death last week. His early death was preventable, as are the deaths of 2,200 Nebraskans who die from tobacco-related causes each year.

Knowing the facts, how do we address this very serious threat to Nebraska? An increase in tobacco tax would help.

Legislative Bill 436 would save lives, save money and raise revenue. That's a win-win in my opinion.

A tobacco tax increase is simply common sense. It's time for us to lead by example and send a clear, consistent no-use message about this drug through policy.

Mary Crosby, Omaha