

## Meeting Outcomes: A Conference to Reinvigorate Public Breeding of Seeds and Animals for a Healthy 21st Century Agriculture

September 12-15 2005 - Ames, Iowa

For centuries, farmers have contributed to the health of their communities through breeding optimal plant and animal varieties. Today this practice is being threatened by lack of funding for these traditional-breeding initiatives. The result of private companies' focus on genetic engineering, which is often a quicker alternative less adaptable to local environments, is that this practice has begun to overshadow traditional ones. Unfortunately, private companies' profit-drive often clouds their view, occluding a holistic vision of the factors that must be incorporated into sustainable agriculture. To share views and devise productive solutions for this dilemma, diverse stakeholders convened for the second "Seeds and Breeds" Conference on September 12-15, 2005.

The 2005 Conference, built upon the first Seeds and Breeds Summit in 2003, engaged an increased array of actors who discussed the current state of breeding practices and strategies for achieving ideal conditions. Specifically, this conference strove to provide a forum for groups and people interested in increasing public funding for seed and animal breeding in the 2007 Farm Bill, as well as to develop strategies for communicating their message to policymakers. Government preparation for this bill is anticipated to begin as early as spring of 2006; therefore, those interested in influencing policy agreed on the need to organize and prepare materials as soon as possible.

The idea of forming a coalition of a broad array of stakeholders, including those who are not traditionally included, was a recurrent theme. To leverage the strongest impact on the Farm Bill, the broadest possible coalition should be formed to demonstrate the diverse support behind the movement for increased public funding. Teams of breeders, buyers, consumers, universities, and NGOs currently collaborate on these issues, while new allies and those who could be targeted for increased involvement may include media, groups advocating for a healthy society, retired breeders, marketers and distributors, among others. In forming this coalition, it is important to draw on sustainable agriculture networks that already exist, as well as state crop-improvement bodies and seed certification organizations. The international context for organic agriculture and breeding practices was also discussed, reminding participants of allies and similar campaigns throughout the world.

It was suggested that the coalition be realistic in its demands, presenting accurate values for the amount of money necessary to implement crucial programs, despite discouraging recent cuts to agriculture funding due to increased allocation to other efforts like Katrina relief and Iraq. The total amount authorized by Farm Bills is rarely met by subsequent allocations, but it is necessary to have the potential to realize envisioned initiatives. Likewise, by stressing the positive economic impact of the organic farming industry, policymakers may be persuaded to consider alternate options to the current industrialized, privatized model.

Creating non-traditional alliances will increase the weight of coalition recommendations, but it also means dedicating even more effort to developing a coherent vision. One of the

principle conclusions of the conference was that stakeholders need to craft a vision statement in a timely manner so that their voice will be heard clearly by policymakers. In addition to contributing ideas to the overall vision, participants were encouraged to participate in ongoing dialogue with the US Department of Agriculture via virtual interfaces accessible on the Internet. <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usdahome>

A number of specific policy proposals were vetted, such as the establishment of a national-level plant breeding institute or initiative, and a summary of those will be published in a separate document of recommendations. Recommendations addressed a wide assortment of issues ranging from alternatives to intellectual property rights, solutions to infrastructure deficiencies, ways to increase farmer participation, and mechanisms to define and tackle funding issues. At the conclusion, the door was left open to the possibility of a third Seeds and Breeds summit, once Farm Bill preparations have begun in earnest, if such a meeting could further the cause. You can find more information on the 2005 conference proceedings at the Seeds and Breeds website: <http://www.agron.iastate.edu/seedsandbreeds/> Additional presentations, and meeting summaries will be forthwith coming.

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