ASA President’s Message

Tell Your Own Story

The topics of food security, environmental integrity, and climate variability and change are appearing widely in the popular press, and agriculture is a focus in all of these discussions. It is important for members of ASA to contribute constructively to dialog about our science and our work because if we don’t tell our own story, someone else will tell it for us.

Agriculture is a dominant land use on the globe, with cropland occupying about 12% and grassland/woodlands occupying about 35% of the earth’s surface (FAO, 2011). These lands support production of food, fiber, and energy, but also, because of the large amount of land used for crop and forage production, agriculture impacts the sustainability of our water supply, biodiversity of native flora and fauna, and the quality of our air, water, and soils. As agronomists, we know that agriculture, done right, provides solutions to environmental problems, but in the broader public dialog, the focus is too often on agriculture as a source of environmental degradation.

For example, the role of forage-based agriculture and animal products in a healthy diet take a particularly hard hit. In much of the public dialog, the focus is on the inefficiency of feeding grain diets to confined animals. The increased efficiencies in animal production systems over recent decades are often not considered. Even more, the critical role of livestock in sustaining livelihoods in semi-arid to arid rangelands and steep terrains is often neglected or dismissed. Grasslands constitute the largest global land use and are an important part of agricultural and ecological systems on every continent, across a wide range of potential productivity conditions. Ruminant livestock grazing is often the only viable form of agricultural production on these lands. It is estimated that livestock production provides at least a partial source of income and food security for 70% of the world’s 880 million rural poor (Neely et al., 2009). Too often this story is missing in the public dialog.

Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack (2015) recently spoke at a USDA Stakeholder Conference on Coexistence, in which agricultural coexistence was defined as the concurrent cultivation of conventional, organic, identity preserved (IP), and genetically engineered (GE) crops consistent with farmer choices and consumer preferences. In his remarks, he said, “Consumers rightfully expect that the product they choose to purchase matches their expectations. American agriculture has a responsibility to meet those expectations. That’s why restarting this conversation about coexistence is so important. There is a diversity of motivations on coexistence issues in a way that advancement. It is confusing, it does not serve the interests of either side, and it negatively impacts consumer confidence. It is also unfortunate that this divisive sort of debating is also going on within the ranks of agriculture.”

Leading the Way Towards Civil Dialog

One of my priorities for ASA is to support Society efforts to take a constructive leadership role in fostering civil dialog about agriculture and food issues. As long as the broader agricultural community remains divided, our ability to sustain a healthy agricultural system declines. As Secretary Vilsack stated, opinions will continue, and that is a good thing. However, it is important that we listen to other opinions and diverse perspectives as we frame our own communication. Our story is increasingly told by people who do not understand our perspectives, sometimes because we haven’t taken the time to engage in dialog with them.

There are many ways we work as a Society to promote the diverse dialog, such as ASA, CSSA, and SSSA CEO Ellen Bergfeld’s participation in the efforts of the Riley Memorial Foundation to develop a unified message for agriculture. Our Science Policy Office works tirelessly with partners to evaluate policy issues and communicate to members as well as advocate to policymakers about how the proposed policies would impact ASA members and Society programs. In addition, the board