ASA President’s Message

Agronomy—Grow with It … and Make This World a Better Place

Reinvest ASA is a unique program, designed to fund ASA programs, activities, and innovative projects that enhance ASA’s value to members and the agronomic profession. The new ASA strategic plan recommits the Society to the goals of this program. The funding level for Reinvest varies annually depending on previous award cycles and the ASA budget but in recent years has been in the vicinity of $100,000. If you have an idea, please watch for the 2017 announcement and submit a proposal.

A wonderful product of the Reinvest ASA program is scheduled for release at the Annual Meeting in Phoenix. It’s a colorful and inviting book entitled Agronomy—Grow With It, and it targets the middle grades, their teachers, and their mentors. The basic message of the book is that agronomy is a profession for people “who are determined to make the world a better place.” It’s inspiring, even for those of us whose schooling predates the invention of “middle school.”

The book features 20 agronomists who have made or are “making the world a better place.” The first one introduced is Norman Borlaug. I was an FFA member in high school when Dr. Borlaug received the Nobel Peace Prize, and honestly, I did not at the time recognize him as an agronomist. To me, he was just a hero that made an outstanding contribution to humankind through the vehicle of agriculture. It was years later in college that I realized he was an agronomist and that agronomy was a profession that enabled the merger of my two primary interests—science and agriculture.

From Science to Solution

I crossed paths with Dr. Borlaug just once and so know of him mostly through the writing of others. It seemed he was a strong advocate of the concept of incremental advances by numerous scientists, each adding to the discoveries of those who went before, as I illustrated with the gravitational waves story in my April column (http://bit.ly/2dcJk3N). He also emphasized the critical role of non-scientists in moving the Green Revolution from the hands of scientists to the hands of farmers. That transfer took an entire profession to accomplish, including those who do science in the many subdisciplines that comprise agronomy and agronomists in both the public and private sectors who help farmers incorporate the products of science into their management systems and real-world farms. Agronomy—Grow With It presents this diverse collection of functions as exciting and rewarding careers.

My office is in a building in the developing research park at South Dakota State University. With the exception of three buildings, the park is actually an alfalfa field. The aroma of fresh-cut alfalfa greeted my arrival today at the office on this beautiful fall morning and reminded me that the science we focus on in the building can only become a solution when it gets moved out to that alfalfa field. The walls between the office or lab and the field are not always easy to pass through, but we are fortunate within ASA to have members and certified professionals who are passionate about discovery and about finding the doors and hallways to connect the discovery to the solution.

I close this column with an admission that the definition of agronomy used in Agronomy—Grow With It is narrower than I would have preferred as it defines agronomy as a science. In my view, it is indeed a science, but it is also a profession that includes scientists and those that use the products of science to “make this world a better place.” Perhaps this variance is an indication that ASA is in transition just as agronomy is in transition. Our disciplinary silos are falling, technology is merging the world of the scientist with the world of the practitioner, and we at times get glimpses of near real-time transfer of the products of discovery to real-world production fields. Citizen science may well become a significant part of agronomy’s future.

Agronomy—Grow with It is available for purchase at www.societystore.org

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