Train a Farmer, Feed a Nation
Launching a New Ag University in Ethiopia
by Tracy Hmielowski

Photos courtesy of Warren Dick.
Train a Farmer, Feed a Nation”—this is the motto of the Bethel Environmental and Agricultural University and Training Center. The Bethel Environmental and Agricultural University and Training Center, or BEAUTC, is a non-profit based in Woliso, Ethiopia and is the brainchild of ASA and SSSA member Warren Dick. Dick first visited Africa as an undergraduate, and years later, a conversation with a fellow soil scientist from Ethiopia made it clear there was a need for quality agricultural education in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has a rapidly increasing population, and with limited land for farming, it suffers from food insecurity. By educating farmers locally, and focusing on local needs, local crops, and sustainable practices, there is potential to improve many communities in this nation.

However, starting a new university is no small task. Dick has slowly developed relationships with colleagues in Ethiopia, traveling multiple times to Africa to discuss the potential for this university. In 2012, he organized a board of directors for Bethel Agricultural Association (BAA) made up of individuals from both the United States and Canada with both academic and commercial backgrounds. This was the first step toward establishing that BEAUTC University would be under complete Ethiopian control, and the BAA board operates as sort of a development organization in support of BEAUTC.

Gobena Huluka is originally from Ethiopia and has been a board member since its inception. “It is my passion to empower farmers to do better regardless of their enormous challenges because they feed the nation,” he says. Huluka, an associate professor in the College of Agriculture at Auburn University, sees BEAUTC as a way to contribute to his home country and support African agriculture in general.

The BAA board in the United States works in cooperation with a separate, fully government approved non-profit board in Ethiopia and administers the BEAUTC project on a day-to-day basis. One responsibility of the BEAUTC Project Manager in Ethiopia, Teddy Amuma, is to coordinate activities with the federal and regional government and to work with the local community.

Amuma joined the project to make a difference in the lives of farmers in Ethiopia. He recognizes some of the negative connotations associated with being a farmer in Ethiopia and sees the university as an opportunity to change how farmers are viewed as well as helping communities gain greater food security.

With leadership established, the next step was to purchase land where the university will be located. Dick says that Amuma was key in brokering this deal with the local community. “Farmers in Ethiopia are very suspicious when you talk to them about how you intend to take their land for any project,” Amuma says. “My greatest challenge was to convince the farmers about the importance of our project and to ask them to leave their land so that our project could open a university and training center.” In 2018, BEAUTC was successful in gaining local support and purchased 32 acres of land for the university.

Dick explains that the next steps to actually offering university courses and credits are to sponsor agricultural- and environmental-themed workshops, create a demonstration farm, develop curriculum, and provide support for sustainable and innovative agricultural businesses. Several workshops have already been conducted on soil quality and sustainable agricultural practices and were enthusiastically received. Nevertheless, to continue to move this project forward, both national and international partners will be necessary.

“By teaching in place, we can build the local knowledge,” Dick says, adding that he hopes that the university will lead to economic development and innovation that stays in Africa. Amuma sees BEAUTC as a way to bring new technology and techniques to farmers in Africa and to help farmers use the land in a responsible and sustainable way as there is currently a lack of modern agriculture in many parts of the country. “In my humble opinion, I believe our project will help our community and the rest of Africa to bridge the gap,” Amuma says.

“Now that many things have been incorporated, the next step is to have the university in place,” he says. “I have an agricultural- and environmental-themed board of directors and a university and training center. We have received funding from various sources, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the American Society of Agronomy (ASA), and the Soil Science Society of America (SSSA), and we have been able to develop new agricultural practices and technologies that are region-specific.”

To improve farming in Africa, there is a need to expand agricultural education options.

• ASA and SSSA member Warren Dick has created a non-profit to establish an agricultural university in Ethiopia.

• By providing quality education, in a local setting, Dick and collaborators hope to retain agricultural knowledge and improve farming practices.

To learn more about BEAUTC, visit: www.bethelagriculture.org.