

Technology key to food shortfall

ARA says one way to mitigate food shortage is increasing productivity through technology

By Heather Hudson

There's no denying it: if world food production doesn't increase over the next 40 years, millions of people could face famine.

As Agricultural Retailers Association (ARA) President and CEO Daren Coppock sees it, one of the answers to unlocking a more abundant food supply lies in the very mandate with which his organization is charged: advocating for the safe and prolific use of technology in agriculture.

"The only way to mitigate food shortage is by increasing productivity and that requires technology, whether it's fertilizer, crop protection, improved practices or genetic technologies. All of it has to be on the table and accepted or we're not going to get to where we need to go. Biotechnology may not be a silver bullet, but it's an important piece of the puzzle."

Though the most obvious answer to solving a shortfall is increasing yield, it's much more complicated than that. With urbanization rapidly encroaching on arable land, growing competition for other resources like water and energy and rising temperatures and shifts in rainfall patterns attributed to climate change, the obstacles to production seem to be the only things that aren't in short supply. Coppock says this is all the more reason to clear the decks for innovation.

"Can we use biotechnology to increase yield? I think the answer is yes, although we may see more impact from biotechnology to control pests and disease than from a direct boost in yield. If we find a wheat variety that's resistant to something like fusarium, the production losses we experience on both sides of the border would be alleviated and we'd get more production."

As former CEO of the National Association of Wheat Growers, Coppock understands the dire nature of the projected shortfall,

noting that there will be a 380 million metric tonne shortfall in wheat demand alone by 2050.

"I assume the same thing would be true in rice, corn, soybeans and other staple crops. There has to be a game changer, something like the past introduction of pesticides or inorganic fertilizer, something to really disrupt the equation in order for us to be able to meet all that demand."

Although he says the ARA doesn't have anything in its current policies that specifically responds to the UN projection of a 2050 population of 9 billion, the organization works steadfastly to advocate for and expedite the safe use of technology to improve agriculture's productivity.

But Coppock will be the first to tell you that their seemingly simple goal is not without its challenges, pointing to recent U.S. court cases involving deregulating Roundup Ready alfalfa and sugar beets and court challenges against the EPA alleging "inadequate consultations" under the Endangered Species Act. In this kind of climate, technology faces challenges to advance, he says.

"We've got groups that will protest anything to do with biotechnology and will always bang their Frankenfood drum, but they don't have any answers for feeding people in 2050... we've had a dozen years of production of biotechnology crops without a single health or public safety documented incident.

"At some point we've got to say, 'Look, the future that you're trying to point us to is one where people starve because there's not enough food.'"

But this isn't the ARA's fight alone. What can ag-retailers on both sides of the border do to push toward the goal of greater



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Industry Insight



“Biotechnology may not be a silver bullet, but it’s an important part of the puzzle.”

Daren Coppock, President and CEO, Agricultural Retailers Association

efficiency and productivity? Coppock says staying plugged into the issues is key.

“Whether it’s in the local coffee shop or in Ottawa through the efforts of CAAR, people need to stay engaged so they know what’s going on and can shape regulations. One of the sayings we have here in DC is ‘if you’re not at the table you’re probably on the menu’ and I’m sure that applies north of the border as well as it does here.”

For a more proactive approach, Coppock says changing public perception about technology can be done at the farm level. If a farmer does all their herbicide, fungicide and fertilizer business with a retailer, Coppock says it might be in everybody’s best interest if that retailer could provide reports to the grower on how much was used, where it went and maybe even do field maps and variable rate technology, all in service of helping consumers access traceability and, in turn, support the technology that is responsibly used.

“These actions and the work we do at ARA all speak to not saddling our food production system with unnecessary costs and burdens. We’re trying to serve that one goal of more efficient food production, now and in the future.” ♦