

# Food for thought: the NC-FAR on sustainable solutions to growing pressures on agriculture

The world's population is growing exponentially, and it is predicted that there will be more than nine billion people on the globe by 2050. The National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (NC-FAR) in the United States, brings together the researchers and stakeholders who are developing solutions to the challenges our planet faces. *Research Features* caught up with NC-FAR President **Andy LaVigne** to find out more about food, forests and the future.

**T**he National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (NC-FAR) is a non-profit, customer-led coalition bringing together food, agriculture, nutrition, conservation and natural resource stakeholders with food and agriculture researchers. The organisation aims to increase public awareness and investment at the national level in food and agricultural research, extension and education.

Andy LaVigne, President of the NC-FAR, as well as CEO of the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA), shared their strategy with *Research Features* for engaging and educating people on how to ensure the future of food production and agriculture is sustainable and fair.

*Hi Andy! What does your role as the President of the National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (NC-FAR) involve?*

The NC-FAR is a coalition of associations all driving for the same purpose; preserving and increasing appropriations for research at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). My role is to bring that diverse group of members together and then to determine how best to ensure that funding is maintained,

and where possible, increased. A lot of that entails targeting the effort and then letting the associations go and do the work.

*What are the organisation's core principles in terms of history, heritage and background and what areas of food and agricultural research are you focusing on?*

Through our education and outreach efforts, we strive to sustain and enhance the federal funding for food and agricultural research and to help bring about research outcomes that provide a range of major public benefits. We are a diverse coalition; we have everything from extension agents and key research function areas, or professional areas within the public community all the way through to the growers' organisations.

Our goal is to have a product that comes out of the research that is beneficial to the grower, or the food processor, or even the consumer. We are looking for safer, more nutritious foods delivered in a sustainable manner, more efficient and environmentally-friendly food, fibre and forest production, improved water quality and conservation together with wildlife and environmental conditions and less dependence on non-renewable energy sources. We are also continuing to look at the

**What we see in the United States is less and less awareness of where our food comes from**



global marketplace to improve the balance of trade within the United States. Last but not least, is trying to improve the sustainability of the rural economic communities and network that we have.

*Why is food and agricultural research so important? What impact does the organisation have in supporting these areas of research?*

I think like many developed economies around the world, what we see in the United States is less and less awareness of where our food comes from. It is important to raise awareness of what has been accomplished through the research done by the USDA and our land-grant institutions. We realise that around the world where you see trouble or strife, things always come down to food. Are people able to have those two or three meals a day in order to live? In addition to this, there are the jobs that agriculture creates in those communities and in the urban areas that produce food.

*What is NC-FAR doing to help support food and agricultural research as well as education to develop sound food and agricultural policy?*

We work on an annual basis in NC-FAR to help support and drive the USDA research initiatives, and a lot of those are directed or outlined within the research title of the United States Farm Bill (a five-year piece of legislation that drives the appropriation process for all research within the USDA). That is our key goal as we look to interact with our elected officials in Washington D.C. One of the things that we do is a 'Lunch and Learn' series on Capitol Hill. There is a significant turnover of staff within the senators' or representatives' offices so at least once a month, we hold seminars to talk about all areas of agricultural research.

*What impact do the 'Lunch and Learn' seminars have in terms of educating with a purpose, and advocating support and funding for food and agricultural research?*

Over the last 12 years, we have had almost 8,500 attendees to our 130 seminars. We have quite a novel approach. If a specific presenter is from a congressman's or congresswoman's district or senator's state, we like to have them introduce the researcher. The staff have a quick, easy lunch and then we have a presentation for about half an hour with questions and answers, and inevitably they go overtime.

Pollinators have been a key issue for example; we have covered natural and managed



Andy Lavigne, President of NC-FAR and CEO of ASTA.

beehives, digital agriculture and big data and plant breeding and genetics, which is obviously a key issue for us and the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA). We cover all of the kinds of things that, if you are not from a farm, you would have no idea about.

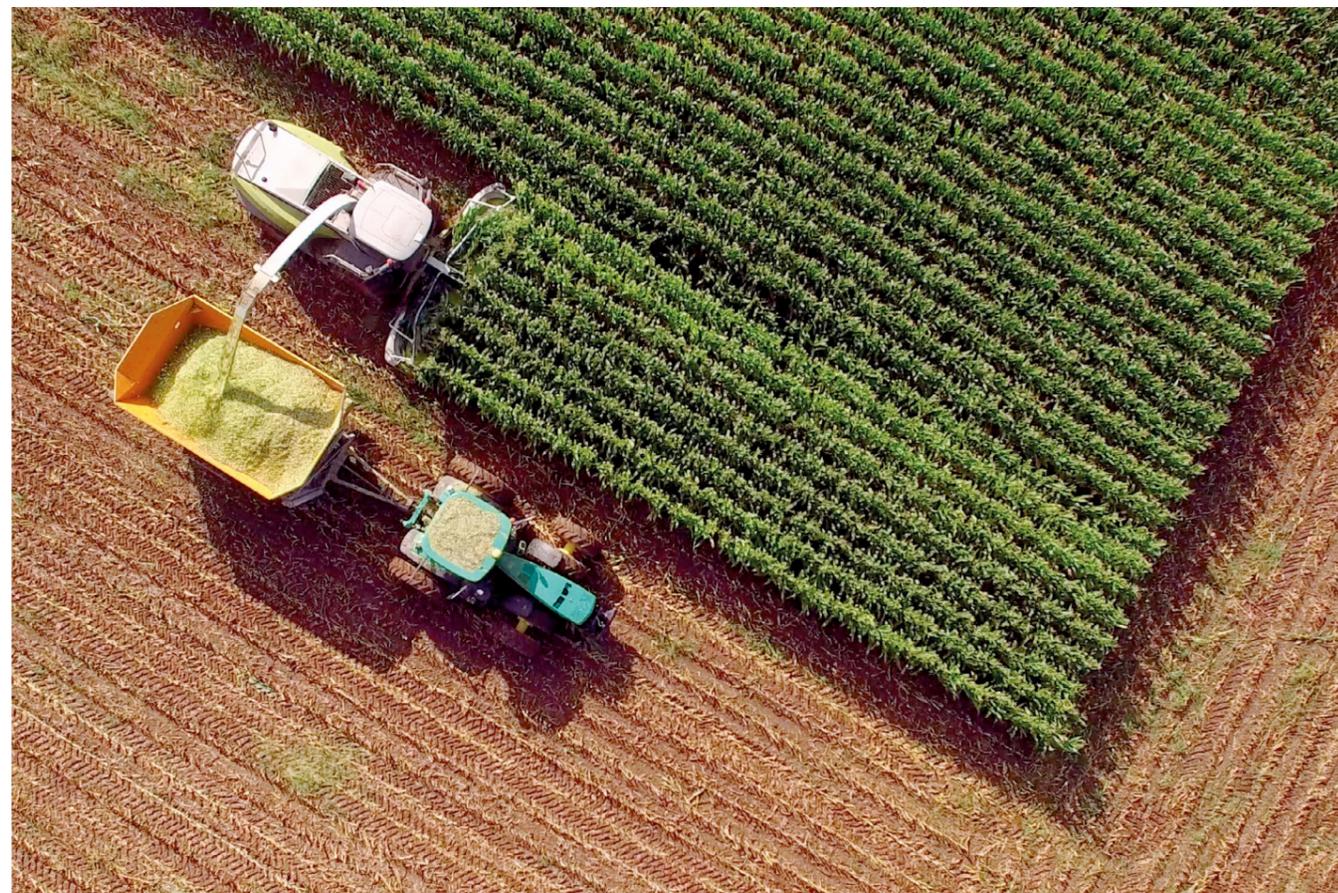
*How influential has NC-FAR been on supporting these areas of research since*

**At NC-FAR, we are unique because we bring a very balanced initiative to the table**



*it was first established, and are there any personal achievements that you're particularly proud about?*

At NC-FAR, we are unique because we bring a very balanced initiative to the table. We push the broad research agenda and we have got a reputation as a sound broker of information that will address both sides of the story and advise on the best direction



that ensures that the agricultural community benefits. I think our biggest success continues to be 'Lunch and Learn'. When we get in front of that number of influential staff numbers on a regular basis, that gives us a face and they know who to contact when they have questions about research titles or funding processes; they know they are going to get a straightforward, honest answer.

*Can you tell us about ASTA and your role as CEO there?*

As CEO of ASTA, I have the opportunity to work with an industry that is driving a lot of research today in the agriculture community. The evolution that we are seeing in plant biology is quite incredible.

ASTA was founded in 1883 and we have about 720 members here in the United States. Our principal market is the United States but we are the largest seed market globally. There is a lot of interaction on a global basis; we do a significant amount of outreach and capacity building in the global arena. We spend a great deal of time in this arena with NC-FAR and other groups, pushing the importance of plant sciences and agricultural research,

and bringing that down to the farm level so that farmers are able to take advantage of the research. ASTA has a great relationship with NC-FAR and I am truly honoured to be part of both.

*Despite great progress in some areas of research, many challenges remain and, in general, world food demand is escalating, health costs remain high and farm incomes remain low. How will NC-FAR try to meet these challenges?*

How do you deal with that evolution or that change in the climate? How do you deal with the change in pest and disease pressure, the change in the demands of the consumer? This is where research's ability to address those issues comes in.

As well as focusing on the American Farm Bill, we are working on the 'Summit on Integrated Research, Education, Extension Priorities to Advance American Agriculture'. This is looking at a long-term view of United States and to some extent global, agriculture. Not just a five-year view as in each Farm Bill, but what the world is going to look like in 2050 when we have nine billion people on the planet.

Agriculture is famous for looking at the current crop that is in the ground or about to come out to harvest, but we have got to look at 20 to 30 years down the road and say, 'Okay, what does this need to look like given the investments that we're making today?'

*If you want to find out more about the NC-FAR, visit [www.ncfar.org/](http://www.ncfar.org/).*



## Contact

National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research  
1800 S. Oak Street, Suite 100  
Champaign, Illinois 61820-6974  
USA

**E:** [ncfar@asochq.org](mailto:ncfar@asochq.org)  
**T:** +1 (217) 356 3182 Ext.151  
**W:** [www.ncfar.org/](http://www.ncfar.org/)

