

World Farmers Need Lots of Tools

By Dal Grooms

Farmers know it's important to keep more than one tool in the toolbox. A variety of tools provide farmers the ability to make lasting repairs that keep equipment working during crucial deadlines of planting or harvest.

After spending nearly a full week with well-meaning folks who tout one solution or another for solving world hunger, it's clear that farmers will need to use a variety of tools to come up with a strategic solution.

The World Food Prize celebration and Norman Borlaug International Symposium that took place Oct. 13-15 in Des Moines, Iowa, was jam-packed with highly regarded researchers, advocates for solving hunger, and policy makers. They spoke from stages about their lofty ideas for solving world hunger. If you found the few actual farmers who attended the event, you could see in their eyes which ideas they knew could be part of the solution, and which ideas just weren't workable.

When speakers talked about combining ideas from high technology (biotech crops) and low technology (crop rotation to build soil quality), farmers nodded their heads readily. They recognized an approach many already use: getting the most return from their tools by selecting and using them wisely.

Head-nodding quickly vanished when a speaker espoused throwing out all the tools but one. It didn't matter if the one highly revered tool was genetically modified seed or organic production.

Farmers know that just as it takes more than one tool to fix a tractor, it takes more than one tool to efficiently produce and market crops and livestock needed to feed the world's ever-growing population.

Farmers were also hesitant to embrace the sole idea that all resources must be targeted to very small farms. Even small-holder farmers (those with 2-3 acres of land or less) recognized that simply improving their production is not going to feed an expected world population of over 10 billion people in 2050.

These small-holder farmers have their sights set on feeding their families and having enough extra production to sell to a few neighbors. They want to improve their economic positions, as well as address local hunger problems. But asking—and expecting—that they alone can increase their production to the point that they'll feed 200-plus people from their 2-3 acres is pushing them down a path of failure.

The world's farmers will find a lasting solution for producing enough food for all. Let's make sure that all farmers, large and small, have all the tools they need.