

Executive Summary of Local Discussions

Bioeconomy Community Conversations II: Food, Feed and Fuel

Over 800 Iowans came to Iowa State University Extension-led community conversations held in 97 Extension districts during November and December 2008. Using recorded presentations, ISU Extension experts shared research related to Iowa's role in meeting national demand for feed, food and fuel. Each community group selected 3 of the 6 presentations¹ to view and discuss. With this information base, stakeholders gave voice to the social, economic, and environmental opportunities and challenges they see presented by the bioeconomy. The value of these conversations is they inform us about costs and benefits associated with the emerging bioeconomy, which can be used to guide future ISU Extension programming.

Supporting Farming

Crop farmers report new economic opportunity, and also increased financial risk and market volatility. While livestock producers benefit from easy access to another feed source, they say co-product quality issues are a source of instability, as are high feed prices. The increased prices of grain are proving to be catastrophic for some livestock producers. The uncertainties facing grain farmers are tied to the success and profitability of the biofuels industry. Ethanol plant profitability and efficiency are seen as key to stakeholder economic survival. A decrease in credit available to ethanol plants threatens industry profitability and farmers' profit margins.

In order to sustain the state's leadership position in crop and livestock production, stakeholders say that diversification in agriculture is needed to reduce systemic risk. Stakeholders say diversification in agriculture should be buoyed by public promotional and educational campaigns to counteract harmful misinformation about the industry and its relationship to food and energy prices. Stakeholders believe that public misconceptions about the "true cost affecting the price of food" exist and create a serious barrier that undermines Iowa's leadership position in agriculture.

Supporting Conservation

Stakeholders report that Iowa's landscape is changing as a result of the bioeconomy. Most counties reported that the industry is driving up corn prices, affecting which crops are planted. Stakeholders say farmers are taking land out of conservation and are planting it with corn, planting more corn on corn, and also may be converting pastureland to row crop production and increasing tillage. Stakeholders offer conflicting evidence about the bioeconomy's influence on such practices. Many counties addressing this topic claim that on-farm conservation practices are declining while some counties say conservation is on the rise. The bioeconomy likely is having a differential impact on different farmers. Extension can play a role in researching these differential impacts and using that information to build outreach programs that mitigate the detrimental environmental effects the bioeconomy might have.

Supporting Food Self Sufficiency

As consumers of farm and energy products, families are important to consider in the context of changing economies. Community conversation participants offered a variety of responses to the question of how ISU Extension can help consumers better understand and manage household food costs.

- The majority of counties suggested Extension focus on enhancing consumer skills pertaining to food, especially food buying decisions, preparing food from scratch, and teaching food preservation techniques.

- They said Extension should lead research and education on market and other forces influencing food prices, with a special eye toward powerful grocery and oil company lobbies.
- Extension is seen as a leader in using research-based information to set the public straight, thereby moving public dialogue closer to the realm of the truth.
- Another possible role of Extension is greater support for local food self sufficiency. This is supported by a vast majority of counties noting an increase in community local food support, based on what they see on store shelves, at farmer's markets, and in schools, and more widespread organizational participation in the local foods movement.

Supporting Vulnerable Families

How are families and communities coping with higher living costs? Nearly every county discussing this topic said households are reducing food costs one way or another and employing strategies to reduce household and transportation fuel costs. Stricter and leaner household spending was another strategy employed by families to cope with rising food and energy prices. Stakeholders acknowledge that families most vulnerable to the rising cost of living are low and fixed income families. They noted communities are making extra efforts to support these families by increasing charitable giving of time and money. Some stakeholders suggest the time is ripe for Extension to connect with assistance providers to provide families another layer of support.

While rising energy costs affect, in a broad way, Iowa's economy, they also have direct and personal impacts on the economic well-being of families. Participants expressed a need for public education about energy conservation and research on efficient energy design for new buildings. As a renewable energy source, wind was the most frequent response – both as a “short term” solution and for personal use. And while participants also saw biofuels as a potential option for meeting short term energy demand, for their own use, they were more interested in solar power and geothermal energy. Extension is well poised to provide the support they will need in realizing that future.

Supporting the Land

The concerns that arose in discussions about soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat were varied and covered a wide range of topics. However, the greatest concerns were for water quality and quantity, soil degradation (mostly in regard to erosion), and poor land stewardship, indicated by practices that encourage profit and production goals to prevail at the expense of land resources, water quality and wildlife habitat. Some stakeholders are already doing their part to correct the negative effects of land use on the environment. Three of the many examples stakeholders provided include reduced tillage practices, developing more county wildlife areas and wildflower plantings in ditches, and working with ISU and other land-grant universities to test and implement new practices.

In addition to implications already drawn from the data, stakeholders were explicitly asked to define the role of ISU Extension in facilitating community conservation efforts:

- Stakeholders suggested Extension **educate** people about conservation issues, and promote conservation programs offered through NRCS and other agencies.
- Participants indicated a desire for continued **research** spanning the range from economic feasibility of conservation practices to agricultural water use.
- Stakeholders also suggested the need to **reach out** to people who are not involved in agriculture, demonstrating the wisdom of the farming community in bridging differences for the benefit of anyone who consumes food and energy.

¹The six Bioeconomy Community Conversations II: Feed, Food and Fuel presentation topics were: (1) Food and Fuel: Enough Grain but Not Enough Processing; (2) Iowa's Position in Global Agriculture and Bioenergy; (3) Factors that Determine the Cost of Food; (4) Rising Energy and Food Prices: Effects on Families; (5) Renewable Energy's Place in the High Energy Cost Picture; and (6) From Vulnerability to Resiliency: Iowa Agriculture in the Age of Biorenewables.