In This Final Issue...

All Good Things Must Come to an End!

State of Texas Vegetable As I See It

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http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu
The good thing referenced in the title of this article is my tenure as Commercial Vegetable Crops Specialist for Texas Cooperative Extension. I will be retiring at the end of October after a 38-year career in the vegetable support industry. Consequently, this will be the last newsletter you will be receiving from me. Therefore, I will take the liberty to express my gratitude to each of you that have provided inspiration and support to my program and me over the years. It truly has been a pleasure and an honor serving the needs of your industry.

Thirty-one of my 38-year career has been spent in Texas as a member of the Texas A&M Ag programs. During this time I have seen many changes occur within the industry. Some of the changes were needed and have had positive impacts. Unfortunately many of the changes have not. The only regret that I have with my career is not being able to provide the information needed to reduce the number of negative impacts on your industry. Hopefully the changes to come in the future will have more positive impacts than negative ones. It is my sincere wish that these changes would enable each of you to prosper in years ahead.

Although I will no longer be an official part of your dynamic industry, it will always be special to me. Good luck to each of you.

State of the Texas Vegetable As I See It

The Texas Vegetable Industry can be characterized as an industry in transition. Once thought of as a producer of poor quality produce and as a backup area to meet supply demand if major production regions fell short. This has not been the case for some time. The quality of Texas produce is comparable to that produced by any other state in the US. Its ability to produce good quality vegetables earlier than most other states resulted in Texas historically ranked third in US production. Unfortunately, this also is no longer the case. In the early 1940s Texas produced 400,000 + acres of vegetables. A steady decline in acreage has occurred over time. By 2006, the total had dropped to less than 100,000 A (USDA NASS data). This data is somewhat misleading due to the fact that Texas produces many more vegetable species than reported by NASS. However, the data does point out a serious downward acreage trend for Texas. If this trend continues, Texas will no longer be a major player in the produce game. Although the acreage decline has been a statewide phenomenon, the hardest hit area has been the state’s major production region, The Lower Rio Grande Valley. This area historically accounted for nearly 70% of the states total vegetable production.

Watching this decline occur over the past 30+ years has been disheartening to me in my role as State Extension Vegetable Crops Specialist. I have spent countless hours discussing the causes of this situation with colleagues and Industry leaders. As expected, many theories have been suggested. Based on my personal observations and discussions with industry personnel I have come up with five basic occurrences and/or factors that I believe have had the greatest negative impact on our industry in recent times. They are as follows:

1. PASSAGE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

In my opinion, the NAFTA legislation has had the greatest impact on the industry in recent years than any other happening. This legislation opened the flood gates for imports from areas that now have become well entrenched as major suppliers of fresh produce to the US markets. Some claim that imports have increased sales of various commodities and they have. Only problem, total sales does not reflect who benefits from them. One of the main reasons that Texas became a major supplier of produce was its ability to produce and distribute fresh vegetable on the US market earlier than most of its competing states. Imports from NAFTA have removed this advantage. It is my belief that the impact from NAFTA is in its influence on start up prices for Texas produce. Vegetable prices at the tail end of the import season now sets the price bar for Texas produce. There no longer is a break in market supplies.

Since tariffs are no longer used to level the playing field for domestic produce perhaps it is time for the industry to lobby for price supports to be placed on vegetables. As major production areas such as the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley are forced out of production, a greater dependence on foreign produce will occur. Our

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government leaders should learn from the energy problem created by our dependency on foreign oil. Food dependence is a whole lot more serious problem!

2. DROUGHT AND URBAN SPRAWL

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, severe drought conditions persisted in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The drought conditions hampered the Valley’s ability to economically produce the volume of commodities normally expected of the area. To further aggravate the impact of water shortage was the initiation of a population explosion in the region about the same time. Increasing population continues in the area today. As a consequence evidence of urban sprawl is ever where in the Valley. Prime crop land is being taken out of production by subdivisions and strip malls which in turn increases land value to the point where it is no longer profitable to grow vegetables on it.

In addition to the increased pressure on a limited water supply caused by urbanization, the areas major water source, The Rio Grande River, is also a major source of water for Mexico. As Mexico’s water needs increase less water from that country is allowed to flow into the Rio Grande.

The above situations stress the need for meaningful and fair legislation governing the water in the Rio Grande and its use. An abundant supply of quality water is a right for all citizens. It should not be made available at the expense of crop production. The crop sector should not be totally exempted. A need exist to develop better water management systems including delivery, culture and scheduling.

Prime crop land is limited. Therefore it may be time to consider land use zoning. We zone areas in cities to protect neighborhoods and to attract business. We even zone areas to protect wildlife. Why can’t we zone to protect agricultural lands! As land and water is diverted to urban uses so will the dependence on foreign imports for our fresh produce.

3. CROPPEST AND DECLING RESEARCH AND EXTENSION PROGRAMS

The emergence of new insect and disease problems also negatively impacted vegetable production. White fly and vine decline became problems approximately at the same time as the previously discussed events. Adequate control measures were not available during the build up of these problems. This was occurring at a time when obtaining label use clearance for new pesticide was becoming increasingly more difficult. As a consequence melon production experienced a serious blow which added to the loss of market of this major commodity group vegetable from the Texas production lineup. Limited resources devoted to solving problems of this type extended the time required to find solutions to them.

In the past was a large, active, well funded group of scientists and extension specialists dispersed through out the state with the capability to respond to and solve emerging problems facing vegetable producers. Over time many of these positions have been cannibalized by budget cuts in the A&M Ag Program. We no longer have the critical mass needed to effectively respond to and solve problems. The following is a summary of the status of research and extension demise occurring during my involvement with the Texas Vegetable Industry.

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<th>LOCATION</th>
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<th>CURRENTLY</th>
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<tr>
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Net loss = 13 full time faculty

* Weslaco was the premier vegetable research center in Texas. Now plans are underway to change the emphasis from vegetable production to biofuels!

There are some in the A&M Ag Program that believe that a declining industry does not merit a strong support group. I differ with this opinion. I believe that in good times very little help is needed. It is in difficult times that help is needed the most. A strong research and extension effort is needed now.

The states industry is changing. Efforts in developing new production technique that save water and increase profitability is a must. We must develop new uses for the commodities we produce. We must develop specialty markets for current crops and for new crops. Changing ethnic make up of the state offer potential for production of crops that meet these people’s needs. Food safety and environmental stewardship are concerns that will remain well into the future. We must develop techniques that insure we produce a safe food supply and protect the environment at the same time. Agriculture has had a black eye. Uninformed consumers believe that agriculture is trying to poison them either by the use of...
The State of Texas Vegetable Continued

pesticides or with produce contaminated with food borne pathogens. Research in ways to restore confidence in vegetables and vegetable production is a real need. There is a real need to come up with ways to train and certify field workers in food safety measures. It does no good if we do not market quality products or to inform the consumer of our efforts on their behalf in these areas. Therefore a need exists to obtain the resources to sell these efforts to the consumer.

If Weslaco is no longer to be the premier vegetable research facility in the State than perhaps efforts should be undertaken to strengthen and enhance the vegetable crops efforts at Uvalde.

The above three sets of circumstances all came about in the relative same time period of the late 80s early 90s. As expected their interactive effect is the real culprit. The industry probably could have resisted the impact of anyone but all together was too severe for some growers to weather.

4. CROP SELECTION AND TECHNOLOGY

Historically Texas was considered a mixed load shipping industry. Fifty or more different vegetables were grown and shipped from the state in any given year. Over the years the industry has evolved to large scale production of a few major commodities. Watermelon, Onion, Cantaloupe, Cabbage and Pepper(s) became the dominate crops produced. Larger scaled operations became essential in order to obtain markets dominated by fewer and fewer wholesale outlets. The buying methods used by the large wholesale outlets also dictate large scale production to meet their demand. As the acreage for these crops climbed so did the size or equipment and packing facilities to accommodate the yield. Once the economy of scale needed to handle the large acreage crops came into existence, it also dictated that remain as the foundation for the industry. Large cantaloupe packing sheds had to pack cantaloupes. Unfortunately, vegetable production in Texas is by nature a high risk business even in the best of times. Disasters caused by weather, pest or prices are real part of the business. When a limited number of crops are produced the ability to hedge risk is reduced. Several such disasters have played a major role is the failure of a number of vegetable operations.

Not all of the decline can be attributed to bad things happening. The effect of technological improvement also has played a role. For example, not too many years ago a 400 bag/A onion yield were considered to be good. Now it is not uncommon to produce yields in the 1500 to 1800 bag/A range. Improved genetics and production techniques such as drip irrigation are the catalyst for this yield capability. As yields go up the need for acres to produce a commodity to meet demand often decreases.

By the same token, it is doubtful if the competition for these limited markets will disappear. What is needed is to develop cropping schemes that enable Texas to reach the specialty markets. Mixed load sales of smaller acreage crops maybe a part of the answer.

Although technology can be a part of the total acreage reduction experienced continued investment in new technology is needed in order to stay in the game. One of the problems observed in Texas is the reluctance to adapt technology at the onset of its introduction. As with most investments, the individual who get in on the ground floor is usually the one who reap the greatest returns. Our industry is always playing catch up in the technology adaptation arena. We need to become the early adaptors.

5. ABSENCE OF INDUSTRY UNITY AND COOPERATION

It is a universal fact that vegetable producers are by nature independent and highly competitive individuals. The perishable nature of their commodities is one of the driving forces behind this attitude. The other, is the need to get on the market first. Buyers are aware of the perishable nature and use this as a bargaining tool. Generally the first to market reaps the greatest rewards. When these are combined lack of cooperation and unity is understandable. It is my firmest opinion that the major cause of loss in acreage is the lack of cooperation among growers and among production areas within the state. There has been a complete lack of concern for the well being of other regions. An example of this is when an emergency pesticide label request is made all regions may not be included even though they face the same problem a little later in the season. Price cutting to move product based only on anticipated slow movement even before it occurs has been relatively common place. Another set back originated with the discontinuance of market orders just to sell poorer quality product. Our industry leaders have failed to grasp the understanding of the old adage “UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL”. Even during better times we failed to band together to market our products. Disbanding of Commodity Marketing orders is an excellent example of the lack of foresight by the industry leaders.

The lack of unity not only hurts the industry in the market place but in the legislature as well. A divided industry just does not have the clout to influence our elected officials, seed companies, ag supply dealer etc. Our industry has gotten to the point where these support industries just aren’t that interested in our needs.

It is not too late to get our industry together. Strengthening of the state vegetable commodity groups is critical. Everyone who grows vegetables to sell, no matter how small the farm, should become an active member of his or her commodity association. The leaders of these groups are the spokesmen for the industry. Your needs must be

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heard. Past attempts to bring all of the state’s produce commodity groups under one umbrella have not been successful. I believe that this effort should be initiated again. The best way to develop unity is for everyone to be apart of a large organization with one common goal, insuring the profitability of the produce industry. Each group can maintain its own identity. Many issues facing these various producers are common to all. It makes sense if they all can get together as a united force to get the help needed to solve them. The larger the membership the better the political types will listen.

If this industry is to survive as a major player in the produce game, it will need to develop a unified marketing program. The maintenance of product quality is a must. Promotion is a must. Contacting individual legislators is a must. Supporting research and extension activities is a must. Each grower in the state has these charges as an obligation to his industry. The industry isn’t as bad off as it may appear. Population in the sunbelt region is on the rise, health benefits of fresh produce is being touted by the medical community, and the consumption of fresh produce is increasing. What the major challenge facing the Texas produce industry is how to capture a fair share of this market. We can do so by developing a unified marketing strategy including all of the production areas within the state. This is needed in order to make a long continuous quality supply of a given commodity. Everyone is constantly being informed of California this and Florida that. Texas products remain a secret.

UNUNITED WE STOOD AND DIVIDED WE FELL! Will that be the inscription on the tomb stone of the Texas Vegetable Industry? I hope not.

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