

## In Focus

### ***In Focus: Welcome!***

Welcome to the fifth edition of *In Focus*, Vision for Illinois Agriculture's (VIA) periodic electronic newsletter. The aim of this newsletter is to keep you up-to-speed on VIA developments, and help your organization provide input to gain benefit throughout Illinois agriculture. Add our address to your email software to ensure consistent delivery! And please forward this newsletter to colleagues, or add addresses to the mailing list by emailing [diplacid@ifib.org](mailto:diplacid@ifib.org).

### **Illinois WorkNet Web Site Set to Launch Agriculture Portal by end of 2009**

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity will launch a new agriculture portal on its Illinois Work Net website thanks to the help of the Vision for Illinois Agriculture Workforce Development Team. The website will serve as a framework for agricultural job information in Illinois, and describe career paths available to differing levels of workers. Vern McGinnis, project coordinator of the Visioning Project, said there will be listings for everything from labor intensive workers such as grain haulers, to highly specialized jobs such as in biotechnology or science. The portal is designed to be one of five designated "high growth" areas for Illinois' work force, and will also provide information on potential salary ranges for different jobs in the field and list job opportunities and offer placement assistance.

More than one-third of the task force members are part of the Visioning process for Illinois Agriculture, and includes members of such organizations as the green association of Illinois, and local food grower associations.

The site is scheduled to go online in late December.

### **ISU Survey Finds Why College Students Choose Ag**

**August 2009**



### **Upcoming VIA Meetings**

No in-person meetings are scheduled at this time.

For more information, please contact Chris Magnuson at 309- 557- 3144 or [cmagnuson@ifib.org](mailto:cmagnuson@ifib.org).

### **Learn More!**

For more information about the Illinois Agriculture Vision, please visit our website at [www.illinoisagriculturevision.org](http://www.illinoisagriculturevision.org).

### **Vision Sponsors**

Growing up on a farm or working in the agriculture field before entering high school lent most agriculture majors currently studying at Illinois State University (ISU) to choose agriculture as a major, according to a study conducted at the university in the spring of 2009. The survey, proposed by the Visioning project, found that 31 percent of ISU's ag majors chose agriculture as a field even before entering high school, and that they chose the field because of the career options available. Students were most influenced by their parents or participation in FFA activities or Supervised Agricultural Experiences in choosing agriculture; almost none relied on their guidance counselor for this type of direction.

The students also noted that family, in addition to the Internet, career shows and teachers, ranked high in assisting with the selection of agriculture as a major.

Vern McGinnis, project coordinator of the Visioning project, said that the Workforce Development Committee is now working to repeat the study at other state universities and community colleges with agriculture curricula. The team's goal is to develop new strategies and programs to attract students and graduates to careers in agriculture

## Illinois Smart Agenda™ hits the Road

The Visioning Project has embraced the Illinois Smart Agenda™ as a vehicle to focus efforts for change needed in Illinois to support growth of the agriculture sector. However, agriculture, as an industry alone, cannot operate in a vacuum to push forward the agenda items, so the VIA Business Climate team will take the Smart Agenda on the road to seek strategic alliances with groups not as closely aligned with agriculture.

The Business Climate Team has selected five areas to focus efforts on in the short term, including: 1. Regulatory responsiveness; 2. Infrastructure for rural roads, highways and bridges; 3. Funding for improving Illinois waterways; 4. Broadband Internet access throughout Illinois; and 5. Support for ag business start ups.

One note of success — The Illinois Capital Bill passed this summer in the state legislature included provisions to increase the load limit for rural roads to 80,000 pounds, a key issue for the community and rural development Smart Agenda item. The Business Climate Team noted that this increase in capacity for rural producers will assist in moving more products off farm to markets.

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Questions or comments? E-mail us at [CMagnuson@ilfb.org](mailto:CMagnuson@ilfb.org) or call 309-557-3144.

## Agriculture is not a dirty word

By Dr. Allen Levine, Dean, College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Sciences,  
University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota

Agricultural science is ripe for a Renaissance. For too many years, the agriculture sciences have been disparaged in the science and education communities, perhaps because agronomy, soil science, plant pathology, and animal science use a problem-solving approach rather than simply seeking knowledge.

When science research funds are handed out—for example, in the federal stimulus bill—agriculture often gets left off the list. I suspect this is because policy-makers and some scientists see “agriculture” as synonymous with “agribusiness,” rather than as a purely scientific discipline, and they assume private funding will take care of agriculture-related research needs. Agricultural scientists at land-grant institutions do receive some research dollars from noncompetitive sources, but not all research is funded this way.

Adding insult to injury, the major U.S. science journals don't devote specific sections or editors to

agricultural research. Some schools of agriculture have taken the word “agriculture” out of their names, presumably to attract more students in a country where only 2% of the population farms. (It hasn’t worked: Enrollment in university agricultural science majors has dropped steadily nationwide since the early 1980s.)

In short, agricultural science has an image problem. Our disciplines are not considered relevant and, more disturbing, we’re not seen as a source of solutions to many of the world’s most pressing challenges, even though many of those challenges directly relate to agricultural science. That’s unfortunate, particularly in a world where people are starving or eating unsafe food, where climate change will affect every aspect of 21st-century life, and where new kinds of sustainable fuel are needed.

The urgency of these global issues—all of them related to the agricultural sciences—amplifies the need for an applied-science approach. Agricultural scientists can do amazing things when they combine their expertise and have access to the resources they need. Recently, scientists at an international conference in Mexico announced that they have found a wheat variety that is resistant to Ug99—a strain of stem rust that could affect up to 90% of the world’s wheat. Although the scientists have not completely eliminated the threat, it’s clearly a breakthrough with enormous implications.

Other recent signs also point to a renewed interest in and respect for agriculture. When the first lady plants a vegetable garden on the White House lawn for the first time in half a century, she’s sending a strong message: Food is important. Books about eating a sustainable, healthy diet top our best-seller lists. The National Gardening Association expects a 19% jump in the number of people growing at least some of their own food this year. Clearly, a growing number of Americans are interested in where their food comes from, even on a small scale.

The 2008 Farm Bill creates the National Institute for Food and Agriculture, which will be headed by a distinguished scientist directly appointed by the president. A small thing, perhaps, but it elevates agriculture to a level of prominence along the lines of health and other sciences. The farm bill also increases funding for competitive grants in both basic and applied agricultural research, which will provide opportunities for advanced study.

Enrollment is up 16% since 2005 among college students in the professional associations that specialize in soil and crop sciences and agronomy, which suggests that today’s students are interested in learning more about agricultural and environmental issues. Job prospects also are good; the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that employment for agricultural and food scientists will be at least average overall and much higher than average in some specialties.

In the long run, does it really matter whether “agricultural scientists” are what we call the people who ensure a safe and plentiful food supply, clean water, and healthy soil? Maybe not, as long as this critical work is funded and accomplished. But as we move into a new era of shared accountability and responsibility, let’s keep in mind that agricultural sciences affect us all, and when agricultural science is thriving, our communities likely are thriving, too.

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