

Exchange Program Gives Growers

Insight Into U.S. Agriculture

The National Cotton Council's Multi-Commodity Education Program gives cotton producers a first-hand look at various crops and agriculture systems from other regions around the United States.



MCEP participants on Jim and Pat Clemens Farm in North Dakota. From left: Bryan Patterson, TX; Paco Ollerton, AZ; Stuart Posey, TX; Mark McKean, CA; Mike Clemens, ND; Donny Lassiter, NC; Ronnie Lee, GA; John Willis, TN; and Lawrence Long, MS.

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MMORE THAN EVER before, cotton growers have an interest in agriculture around the United States. The Farm Bill debate brings agriculture to the forefront of mainstream media, and growers need to be as unified as possible when explaining their needs to legislators. If cotton producers have a better understanding of the issues that their counterparts face in the Midwest and around the country, agriculture as whole will benefit.

That's just one of the goals of the National Cotton Council's Multi-Commodity Education Program (MCEP), sponsored by John Deere and Monsanto. The newest Cotton Foundation project, MCEP facilitates a dialog between cotton growers and producers of various crops from outside the Cotton Belt. This exchange should also promote solidarity between commodity groups, as

well as increase shared information and agriculture practices that could benefit farming operations throughout cotton-growing regions.

Last August, eight NCC members went on a week-long tour of North Dakota agriculture that included

farming operations, a flour mill, a barley malting facility, a sugar beet refinery, an ethanol plant and more. The NCC partnered with the North Dakota Grain Growers, who helped organize this tour which was the second in the program. In 2006, a group of growers from North Dakota, Oklahoma, Illinois, Wyoming, Kansas and Minnesota visited cotton operations in North Carolina, as well as Cotton Incorporated's headquarters and spinning facilities.

MCEP is structured to provide interaction between growers and to educate them regarding the different issues that producers face around the country. John Gibson, director of member services at the National Cotton Council, said the recent tour definitely succeeded in that regard.

"The more growers in different parts of the country communicate and interact with one another, the more it helps all parties involved understand that U.S. agriculture has to stick together. There are regional differences and certainly



MCEP participants went to the John Deere Air Seeder Plant in Valley City, ND.

the crops can be different, but agriculture needs to work together from a unified platform,” Gibson said. “This trip to North Dakota is a prime example. Everyone’s perception in our group changed regarding agriculture in that part of the country. So in the long term, I think this is going to help create a better understanding between different sectors of agriculture throughout the country.”

After meeting several North Dakota growers and discussing their operations, program participants realized there are a lot of similarities that unite agriculture as a whole.

“It was interesting to hear the North Dakota growers talk about the issues and concerns that they have. Many were the same that our growers have, and it really drives home the fact that all of agriculture is in the same boat,” Gibson said. “We heard the same things about the Farm Bill as far as timing and certain provisions that concern them. Then we heard similar things about conservations programs, high inputs, increasing costs of production and all the other things that our growers deal with regularly.”

Cotton Growers Agree

Even with the differences in crops and climate conditions, the program also gives growers ideas and strategies they can implement in their own operations. Donny Lassiter, a North Carolina producer who participated in the tour, said he gained several insights from the program that could benefit his farm.

“There is a lot we can learn from these (North Dakota) producers.

They are very good managers up there, and they pay close attention to their actual production cost, right down to the nickel. And that is something I can take back home and apply to my farming operation,” Lassiter said. “The way they handle their

farms the group visited managed 5,000 or more acres with only two employees. McKean, who farms 6,000 acres of cotton and other crops, has 29 year-round employees – a big difference from the spartan operations in the Midwest.

“At first glance, you look at what they are doing, and it is so different that you think there are not any ideas you can use. But if you step back and take a second look at it, you find that there are a whole lot of ideas that you can apply in maybe a different way to your operation,” McKean said. “One thing that I realized when I listened to these guys is that we need to continue to simplify. We need to get more out of our equipment, fewer passes through the field; we need to get more out of what we are doing, while doing less.”

In all, the open dialogue and information exchange make the program a success, especially during a time when agriculture should stand united. Ronnie Lee, a Georgia cotton producer and ginner, said this was one of the most important benefits of the program. And like the PIE (Producer Information Exchange) and Policy Information programs sponsored by the NCC, Lee believes the MCEP will be an asset to

growers across the Cotton Belt.

“The MCEP helps communication,” Lee explains, “so when different commodities go to Washington we will understand each other’s problems. Then agriculture in general can all be on the same page. The great thing about the U.S. cotton industry – everyone will tell you – is that when we get to the table we are united. If we learn from each other, we can have a more unified message for U.S. agriculture.” ■



Dr. Senay Simsek at the Northern Crop Institute of North Dakota State University explains to Arizona cotton producer Paco Ollerton how different types of wheat affect dough characteristics.



Travis Devlin from the North Dakota Mill shows MCEP participants what wheat looks like in different milling stages.

grain is something else we could learn from. Cotton is still going to be our staple crop, but we are going to have some sort of grain in our rotation, so we can learn a lot from them, such as using fungicides on soybeans. That is something I never thought of before, and it might be something worth taking a look at.”

California cotton producer Mark McKean agreed. He was impressed with the efficiency of North Dakota farming operations. Several of the