Stakeholder Engagement Key to C-FAR

Over 60 private sector professional organizations make up the core membership base of the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research (C-FAR). These stakeholder members represent hundreds of thousands of Illinois citizens from virtually every sector of the state's food and agricultural system. By working together and sharing their firsthand experiences, these members continue to be vital to C-FAR’s success in helping guide Illinois’ publicly funded food, agricultural, and related research programs. While the engagement and contributions of all C-FAR members and partners are important, taking advantage of the “in the field” knowledge and expertise of the organizational members continues to be a top priority of C-FAR.

“Since the initial discussions about the possibility of forming C-FAR, stakeholders being on the front line of service has been a paramount objective. It remains so today,” said Alan Puzey, C-FAR chairman.

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Greetings

THE ILLINOIS DIFFERENCE:
PHD NOT REQUIRED

Illinois has a highly unique organization that no other state in the nation can boast: C-FAR. While just having such an organization is not reason to boast, what C-FAR enables in Illinois is.

C-FAR provides an effective and meaningful mechanism to engage stakeholders of Illinois’ food and agricultural system. The result is a set of state-funded research programs that are more focused, more practical, and more closely aligned with the needs and opportunities of Illinois.

So just how do stakeholders—working as state ambassadors with Illinois’ research community—make this happen?

I recently received a telephone call from a relatively new C-FAR member who was concerned about the contributions she could make within a C-FAR working group because she isn’t a scientist. She is a farmer. My response: “That is exactly why you need to be engaged!”

C-FAR has developed a user-friendly structure that is seizing the invaluable benefit of stakeholder engagement. (I use the term stakeholder to broadly include all citizens and professionals who benefit from publicly funded research.) The C-FAR model is specifically designed to engage stakeholders so that their firsthand, “in the trenches” experiences can be brought to the table. A PhD is not required. No special expertise in research protocols is necessary. In C-FAR, it is the sharing of these frontline experiences and real-world knowledge that are crucial as research priorities for Illinois are set and research proposals are reviewed.

Professionals from a broad range of sectors within Illinois’ food and agricultural system have joined together with our state’s top scientists, via C-FAR, in an unprecedented partnership. We do so with appreciation to Governor Blagojevich and members of the Illinois General Assembly for entrusting the C-FAR appropriation to the guidance of the people of Illinois whose input is invaluable. Every perspective is not only welcome, but absolutely necessary. It is the Illinois difference.

Kraig A. Wagenecht
Executive Administrator
Stakeholder Engagement
Key to C-FAR
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ORGANIZATIONS IDENTIFY REPRESENTATIVES TO C-FAR
C-FAR organizational and affiliate members select individuals to represent their organization at C-FAR meetings and events. These representatives work together with C-FAR’s individual members to identify research priorities and guide the direction of publicly funded research to ensure that the maximum benefit from these investments is achieved for Illinois. Each organizational and affiliate member identifies a person to serve as its Contact. These individuals receive dues notices, are responsible for keeping C-FAR appraised of any change in their organization’s representatives, and are encouraged to promote their members’ involvement in C-FAR activities.

Organizational and affiliate members also identify individuals to serve on each of the five C-FAR working groups: agricultural markets, rural economic development, agricultural production systems, human nutrition and food safety, and natural resources. Organizations are not required to have a representative to serve on each working group; however, representation within each area of research is encouraged. Individual members select the working group in which they would like to participate.

Organizational members are the only membership type allowed to vote on issues where votes are cast. Each organizational member identifies a Voting Delegate to vote on behalf of their organization on membership-wide issues. Organizational members are also encouraged to identify a Communications Contact to coordinate efforts to keep their organization’s membership up-to-date on C-FAR initiatives and research activities.

WORKING GROUPS IDENTIFY RESEARCH PRIORITIES
C-FAR members collectively volunteer thousands of hours every year to ensuring the state’s appropriation for food and agricultural research is soundly invested. Members provide input through the working group structure and place an emphasis on research that produces practical outcomes. While members represent their organizations and share insight from their own perspectives and experiences, they come together via the working groups to determine which research investments will best benefit Illinois and its citizens.

“The C-FAR working group model is designed to allow our members to be associated with areas of research that parallel their interest and expertise. This has been tremendously beneficial,” said Nels Kasey, research chair.

C-FAR: A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP
C-FAR has gained national recognition as a premier public-private partnership. No other state has brought together government officials, industry professionals, university administrators, and researchers all working together in support of effective, stakeholder-driven food and agricultural research as successfully as Illinois. The results have been the formation of important relationships among professionals from all these groups, increased collaboration on research among our state’s research institutions and other entities, and the ability of research initiatives and outreach programs to more effectively serve the needs of Illinois.

“While the national recognition C-FAR has garnered is extremely gratifying, our goal remains to keep building on the strengths of our partnerships,” said Puze. “The vibrancy of these partnerships is what earned us national recognition, and our future endeavors must continue to be anchored by this principle.”
**FY06 External Competitive Grants Program**

C-FAR members have prioritized research projects for funding through the FY06 External Competitive Grants Program, a process that started last September when a request for pre-proposals for the program was issued. Per the Food and Agriculture Research Act (C-FAR’s enabling legislation), 15% of the appropriation must be allocated each year to a competitive research grant program open to all qualified researchers in Illinois.

“The External Program is unique in that it encourages all Illinois nonprofit institutions, in addition to our four university partners, to participate,” said Nels Kasey, C-FAR research chair. “It is also unique in the fact that stakeholders drive every aspect of the review and selection process. Our entire state benefits from such a dynamic program.”

For the FY06 program, 98 pre-proposals requesting a total of over $10 million were submitted from researchers throughout Illinois. The pre-proposals outlined research that would address a wide range of areas, from disease control in swine and the expansion of vegetable crops to the enhancement of the nutrition value in milk and the destruction of microbial hazards in foods. Members of C-FAR’s five working groups reviewed pre-proposals aligned with their focus area to evaluate the proposed research’s relevance to the focus area and sub-objective, expected outcomes and benefits to stakeholders, and dissemination plan. Based on feedback from these evaluations, 45 proposals were selected and the principal investigators were invited to submit a full proposal.

In February, 44 full proposals requesting a total of $4.7 million were submitted to the competitive grants program. Proposals were received from researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), University of Illinois Extension, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC), Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIUE), Illinois State University, Illinois State Water Survey, Illinois Natural History Survey, and Western Illinois University. Full proposals were sent to the respective working group members to review prior to their meetings in March.

In March, all five working groups met to prioritize proposals for funding through the FY06 program. Dr. Tony Young, recently retired from SIUC, and Dr. George Fahey, UIUC College of ACES Assistant Dean of Research, were on hand for members to use as a resource for scientific counsel. While all members engaged in discussions of the proposed research, when a vote was necessary in the selection of which projects would be prioritized for funding, only Organizational members (C-FAR’s stakeholder organizations that collectively represent thousands of Illinois’ industry-based professionals) were allowed to vote.

The working groups identified 13 proposals requesting $1.3 million as top priority research to fund through the FY06 program, pending C-FAR’s FY06 appropriation. All principal investigators who submitted a full proposal to the program were provided with comments from the working groups. Projects funded will complement additional research funded through C-FAR’s Strategic Research Initiative Program and the four partner university internal research programs.

“We very much appreciate our members’ engagement in this program,” said Kasey. “The opportunity to bring end-users of research to the table to help guide funding decisions is invaluable.”

Final funding decisions for the FY06 External Competitive Grants Program will be made when the State of Illinois budget is approved by the Illinois General Assembly and signed by Governor Blagojevich. The General Assembly is currently scheduled to adjourn on May 27.
Researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), funded in part by C-FAR, are developing new food-processing technologies to protect the safety and enhance the quality of our food supplies. Food scientist Hao Feng and his research team are using high-frequency sound waves and other innovative food-processing techniques to kill foodborne pathogens, such as *Listeria monocytogenes* and *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, on a variety of food surfaces. High-energy ultrasound kills bacteria by causing their cell membranes to fracture or leak. The research team uses a specially designed multi-frequency, multi-mode, modulated sono-reactor—the first of its kind in the world—to study ultrasound’s proficiency in food-preservation applications. “The C-FAR funding is no doubt crucial to my research. It allowed me to get started,” said Feng.

Feng’s research has shown that ultrasound, combined with electrolyzed water and other sanitizers, can be effective in removing potentially dangerous pathogens from hard-to-reach crevices along the surface of many fruits and vegetables. “Electrolyzed water is created when electrolysis is used to split saltwater into two streams, one acidic and the other alkaline. Acidic water is effective in killing microorganisms on many food surfaces, including fruits and vegetables, eggs, poultry, beef, and seafood,” said Feng.

The juice industry is one of the many potential beneficiaries of this research. Each year, about 16,000 to 48,000 cases of foodborne illness caused by contaminated fruit and vegetable juices are reported in the United States. The juice industry in Illinois consists primarily of small and mid-sized operations who cannot afford the expense of pasteurizing their juice products. Of the 77 cider producers in Illinois, only about 30% sell pasteurized juices. The newly developed ultrasound technology may offer a juice pasteurization technique that can ensure juice safety, provide better quality retention, and be affordable to small and mid-sized juice producers. Traditional methods of removing potentially dangerous pathogens involve using high heat alone, which affects the quality of the juice. “Apple cider producers in Illinois and across the nation are eager for new pasteurization methods that maintain the desirable taste qualities of raw cider while providing the safety of pasteurization. This cost effective solution using ultrasound may be the answer we’ve been looking for. In addition, it appears that this technology has a wide range of applications. That should improve its chances of going from the lab to the marketplace,” said Randy Graham, co-owner of Curtis Orchard in Champaign.

Research conducted by UIUC food microbiologist Scott Martin has shown that ultrasound, when combined with ozonated water, can be used to easily remove *Listeria* biofilms from stainless steel surfaces. This finding suggests an improved way of sanitizing food preparation surfaces from potential pathogens such as *Listeria* and *Shigella*, which are difficult to remove by scrubbing alone.

In addition to killing foodborne pathogens, ultrasound has proven effective in helping to preserve or improve the quality of several processed foods. Researchers have found that, by using ultrasound, they have been able to deactivate tomato enzymes that cause a loss of body in tomato pastes and sauces, reduce enzyme activity in orange juice that causes pulp separation and juice cloudiness, and reduce the amount of lye necessary to chemically peel tomatoes.

“Currently, the greatest number of foodborne illnesses reported in Illinois are caused by contaminated fruits and vegetables. Since The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005 urges us to increase our intake of fruits and vegetables in order to improve our diet and health, we must improve the safety of these and all foods we produce. This project provides cost-effective technology that will aid in improving food safety and assist in improving the health status of Illinois citizens,” said Karen Little, C-FAR research vice chair and registered dietician.

This research has been funded by the State of Illinois via C-FAR, ConAgra Foods, Inc., and the Center for Advanced Processing and Packing Studies (CAPPS).

**C-FAR Connection**  Spring 2005
Illinois is the fifth largest state in terms of wine consumption, with consumers spending $600 million annually on wine. While the Illinois wine industry has an economic impact of $7.5 million a year, statewide wineries currently make only enough wine to meet one-third of one percent of that demand. With the recent expansion in the number of Illinois wineries, it is anticipated that wine sales will increase by 15% annually for the foreseeable future.

Opening its doors in November 2004, the Lavender Crest Winery located just east of I-80 near Colona is one of the newest wineries to showcase grapes grown in Illinois and the Midwest.

Martha Bazik-Rittmueller, a University of Illinois Extension unit leader, studied potential markets for organic products in Illinois as part of a research initiative funded by the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research (C-FAR). “As part of my C-FAR research, I investigated market opportunities for organic and other value-added agriculture products,” said Bazik-Rittmueller. “There appeared to be a unique opportunity for a winery to be established in the Quad Cities Area that would provide an additional market for Illinois grape growers.”

Before corn and soybeans became the norm, Illinois was the second largest producer of grapes in the United States. Currently, there are more than 250 commercial growers in Illinois. Lavender Crest Winery produces 10 wines from Illinois grapes. Last year, the winery purchased about 12 tons of grapes from Illinois producers. This year the winery expects to purchase approximately 25 tons. “Lavender Crest brings the total number of wineries in Illinois to 55,” said Bill McCartney, Executive Secretary of the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association.

The winery consists of two main buildings. In the wine production facility, grapes are cleaned, pressed, separated, clarified, and fermented. The resulting wine is bottled on-site with state-of-the-art equipment. The other building consists of a large tasting room, retail wine outlet, gift shop, coffee shop, and banquet center. In addition to bottle wine, the winery offers an assortment of refrigerated wine-and-cheese packages, flavored coffees, and baked goods. Unique lavender-based gifts, wine accessories, wine art, wine-related books, and a selection of crafts, artwork, and food products developed by Illinois artisans and specialty producers will be sold in the gift shop. Visitors are also able
to participate in wine tasting and a tour of the small vineyard and wine production areas.

Winery owners hope to further foster economic development of local agriculture by encouraging local landowners to add value to their farm enterprises by growing grapes for Lavender Crest Winery. One acre of high quality grapes can produce 4 to 5 tons of grapes. Grapes are sold in Illinois for $800 to $1000 per ton. To date, the winery has five growers who have expressed interest in providing grapes to the winery. Two have the grape stock and will start this spring. The other three intend to begin in 2006.

“There are significant opportunities in Illinois to pursue value-added initiatives such as organic products, wines and grapes, agri-tourism, et cetera,” said Bazik-Rittmueller. “These types of enterprises have the potential to strengthen the economic outlook for producers and other rural residents, as well as the State of Illinois.”

Lavender Crest Winery is open seven days a week. For more information, call 309.949.2565 or send e-mail to info@lavendercrest.com. For information on Illinois wineries, visit the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association website at www.illinoiswine.com.

Mark Your Calendars!

Mark your calendars for the C-FAR Semi-Annual Meeting of the Membership to be held on Tuesday, August 23, in Springfield. The day will also include meetings of the five C-FAR working groups. All C-FAR members are encouraged to attend. Your input and participation are important!

Member Survey to be Reviewed by Board

In February, a survey was mailed to all C-FAR members requesting feedback on how C-FAR is serving their needs and what the C-FAR board and staff members can do to serve members better. This survey sought feedback on C-FAR as an association, and was not intended to address research-related issues. Input on research will continue to be sought through the working group process. The survey asked members to evaluate such organizational operations as annual and semiannual meetings, communication activities, staff responsiveness, and more.

“I am grateful to everyone who took a few minutes to complete and return the survey,” said Kraig Wagenecht, C-FAR executive administrator. “I assure you the feedback received will be considered very seriously. The board has indicated that a substantial segment of time will be allocated at their July meeting to reviewing the feedback. We look forward to doing so and utilizing this information as we chart our future programs and activities.”

Mark Your Calendars!

C-FAR
www.ilcfar.org
Your headquarters for C-FAR news and information on funded and completed research.

NAT TOOLS FOR GOOD HEALTH
nat.crgq.com
A source for analyzing diet and food choices.

FARM.DOC
www.farmdoc.uiuc.edu
Provides producers and other agricultural professionals with decision-making information and analysis tools.

MARKETMAKER
www.marketmaker.uiuc.edu
An interactive mapping system that locates businesses and markets of agricultural products in Illinois, providing an important link between producers and consumers.

ALTERNATIVE CROPS FOR ILLINOIS
www.sws.uiuc.edu/data/altcrops
Helps producers identify and find information on potential alternative crops.

INTERACTIVE AGRONOMY HANDBOOK
www.ag.uiuc.edu/iah
Databases and online resources complement handbook.

ILLINOIS IPM ONLINE
www.ipm.uiuc.edu
An environment for learning about integrated pest management.

ILLINOIS WATERSHED MANAGEMENT CLEARINGHOUSE
www.watershed.uiuc.edu
Helps groups create and implement a plan to address local watershed issues.

ILLINOIS TRAILL
traill.outreach.uiuc.edu
Organizes livestock research, information, and expert services.
Please call the C-FAR office or check the calendar on the C-FAR website at www.ilcfar.org for further details.