

# FARMING FORWARD

Corn growers have increasingly stepped beyond the farm itself to influence changes that affect their ability to operate. One of the most important steps came in 1957, when farmers saw the need for a stronger voice on corn issues in Washington and decided to establish the National Corn Growers Association.



It has been farmers, in each generation since then, who have spoken for their neighbors and their industry on a roster of issues that began with agricultural policy and now includes infrastructure, energy, biotechnology, conservation, research, and education about production agriculture.

Their stories are a study in grower initiative, leadership, and change. In the weeks to come, NCGA will share some of the corn industry’s success in the words of the farmers who experienced this innovation and change first hand.



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## **Grower Organization Maintains Momentum, Moves Farming Forward**

There is a common image of the farmer tilling the land as his ancestors did in an unchanging landscape – and then there is the reality of modern agriculture. For today's farmers, change is a constant, and success depends not just on adapting to change but on the ability to anticipate change and create it.

Consider, for example, the revolution in U.S. corn production.

Today's corn grower typically grew up in the 1950s and 1960s as corn production was being revolutionized by new technologies from hybrid seed, herbicides, and commercial fertilizers to tractors and the first self-propelled combines.

In 1957, U.S. corn growers set a new yield record – 48.3 bushels per acre – producing a crop of just over three billion bushels. None of the crop went into fuel ethanol or high fructose corn syrup, and only 200 million bushels were exported.

Since then, the list of new technologies alone is staggering: biotechnology, no-till and low-till, global positioning satellites and precision ag, variable rate application, and equipment that will plant 36 rows of corn in one pass.

Corn growers haven't just accepted these technologies as circumstance forced them.

Instead, they have often been creative innovators, tinkering in the machine shed to improve a piece of equipment and pressing farm input suppliers for new solutions to farm challenges. These corn farmers, beginning with the so-called "early adopters," drive the process of spreading new methods and solutions as word spreads from neighbor to neighbor.

The result: U.S. corn farmers produced more than 147 bushels per acre in 2011, for a total crop of 12.4 billion bushels. By 2020, it is estimated that U.S. farmers will grow more than 17 billion bushels of corn.

It's not just in the field that the world of farming has changed. Policy changes follow year after year – not just farm bills but rail and shipping deregulation, trade wars and barriers, new environmental laws and conservation programs.



Agriculture has weathered grain embargos, the Asian fiscal crisis, the 1980s farm depression, and more.

As with corn production, corn growers have increasingly stepped beyond the farm itself to influence these other changes that affect their ability to operate. One of the most important steps came in 1957, when farmers saw the need for a stronger voice on corn issues in Washington and decided to establish the National Corn Growers Association.

It has been farmers, in each generation since then, who have spoken for their neighbors and their industry on a roster of issues that began with agricultural policy and now includes infrastructure, energy, biotechnology, conservation, research, and education about production agriculture.

Their stories are a study in grower initiative, leadership, and change. In the weeks to come, NCGA will share some of the corn industry's success in the words of the farmers who experienced this innovation and change first hand.

## **NCGA Membership is What Makes Corn Matter**

When the National Corn Growers Association reached a membership record of 37,160 in August 2011, it was clear to see to whom the credit ultimately should go.

“At the end of the day, the sure-fire way to get a member is for a current member to go and ask another grower,” says Matt Gibson, the Indiana Corn Growers chairman who headed NCGA’s membership committee, the Grower Services Action Team, for three years.

“Some people will respond to gimmicks, but we went away from that,” he explains, noting that NCGA membership is increasing even as the number of farmers in the United States continues to decrease.

Ask NCGA leaders what got them involved and the message is the same: another member asked them to join.

Leon Corzine, an Illinois farmer and NCGA president in 2006, has a typical story. “A good friend of mine was Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Joe Hampton. I knew him through 4-H and he suggested I look at getting involved with the corn growers. So I went to a meeting, and here is my



Matt Gibson



Fred Yoder

neighbor sitting next to the governor. I was impressed. I thought it was a good organization of farmers representing farmers and I liked the fact that corn growers could focus on corn issues.”

Fred Yoder, an Ohio grower and NCGA president in 2003, tells a similar tale. “I was farming on my own and had a seed business and along with each sales call you get to talking with other farmers. Jim Mitchell was on the Ohio Corn Growers board but he was moving to county commissioner and he asked would I fill out his unexpired term on the corn board.”

“I had been involved with the Farm Bureau’s women’s programs, but I wanted to be at the table where you can achieve more,” says Pam Johnson of Iowa, NCGA’s current first vice president. “Then I got a call from former Iowa Corn Promotion Board chair Helen Inman about running for the Iowa corn board.”

“I was happy being a farmer and then in ’87 my neighbor said ‘you could make a difference if you got involved in some farm organizations,’” recounts 2012 NCGA president Garry Niemeyer from Illinois. “And I got involved and really began to see how organizations operate and what happens in government and why it matters to us farmers.”



Walter Goeppinger

Walter Goeppinger, the NCGA’s founder, set the pattern from the beginning when he recruited neighbors to help establish the organization in 1957. His goal was a farmer-driven group designed specifically to answer corn growers’ needs, which many members cite as their reason for involvement.

Throughout the organization’s history and across the NCGA’s 48 state organizations, farmer-to-farmer contacts continue to be the backbone of membership and leadership recruitment.

“That’s how we totally built membership in the early days,” says Iowa Corn Growers Association past director Warren Kemper, a southeast Iowa farmer. “We went door to door, just like a salesman, usually two of us at a time.”

Kemper himself was recruited that way: “NCGA president Jack Parsons (1983) went to a state meeting, and when he told me about it, it sounded like an organization that a farmer should belong to.”

In agriculture, where growers commonly turn to each other to share information, farmer-to-farmer recruiting has been a success for NCGA,





building its membership numbers even as the number of U.S. corn farmers has dropped from almost two million to less than 350,000.

It's not enough, however, to recruit members, says Gibson: "How you keep members is another question. You want to create a system so that if a member lapses, they know very quickly the benefits they're losing." Over the 55 years since Goeppinger's time, NCGA's effort to meet members' needs has led to a range of programs, many of which have become institutions in U.S. agriculture.

In 1965, NCGA's National Corn Yield Contest began with just 20 entries and a winning tally of 218.9 bushels per acre. For members, the yield contest offers the chance to learn from (and compete with) their peers as they push production efforts to feed and fuel the world.

By 2011, the National Corn Yield Contest offered multiple entry categories for irrigated and non-irrigated farms and for conventional, ridge-till, and no-till/strip-till practices. The contest produced a record 8,431 entries, and a top yield of 429.0216 bushels per acre in the no-till/strip till irrigated category. Total entries have increased 18 percent since 2010 and 71 percent since 2007.

Another iconic NCGA program, the Corn Classic, evolved in the 1980s from an annual meeting into a broader grower opportunity combining educational programs, business meetings, farm show and an opportunity for corn farmers to meet. In 1996, the Corn Classic merged with the annual meeting of the American Soybean Association to become the Commodity Classic, bringing together corn and soybean growers, and their partners throughout the value chain. Commodity Classic added wheat growers in 2007 and grain sorghum producers in 2009. The convention and trade show now draws thousands of participants for a unique opportunity to work across commodity boundaries.

In an increasingly global market, NCGA information and education programs are another key benefit of membership.

"Most of our farmers today are very connected with e-mail and text messaging," says Gibson. "We try to serve that with 'News of the Day,' our website, blogs and more. Once people join, there's a lot of excitement that keeps them involved."

Finally, strong membership numbers underpin NCGA's growing effectiveness in the policy arena. In return, a powerful NCGA presence in policy debates is possibly the most important membership benefit of all.



Garry Niemeyer



Dee Vaughan



That's what Dee Vaughan, an NCGA past president (2004) from Texas, thinks.

"The biggest benefit corn growers get from NCGA would be its efficacy in Washington, DC, says Vaughan. "Over all, NCGA is much stronger today than in '96 [when Vaughan joined]. NCGA was respected back then, but it has a lot more esteem today."

Still, while the Classic, the yield contest, and policy successes are major contributors to NCGA's membership success, many growers cite the opportunity to build friendships with farmers from other states as the greatest membership benefit of all.

"In NCGA, I got to network with farmers who grow corn in other states. One of best benefits of getting involved with NCGA is the chance to make friends all across the country and you can learn from each other," says Yoder.

## **Keeping Agriculture Front-and-Center With Consumers**



Bob Dickey

For most adult Americans, the widespread hunger of the Great Depression and starvation during the Second World War were recent memories when the National Corn Growers Association was established.

It's doubtful they ever imagined that farmers might be blamed for becoming too efficient or that the day would come when defending agriculture would become a major corn grower initiative.

Times have changed. In the last decade, production agriculture has faced repeated attacks often aimed at picking off one sector at a time. Corn growers have been blamed for corn being too cheap, for corn being too expensive, for corn causing obesity and for corn causing starvation.

One of the cheapest shots was probably the effort that peaked in 2008 to blame the success of ethanol for high food prices.

"That was one of the biggest challenges," says Bob Dickey, a Nebraska grower and NCGA officer at the time.

"We did a tremendous amount of work not only to educate the consumer but to educate the news media about the facts. Since then, there's a lot



more facts that show energy costs have more effect on food prices than the commodities did – a lot of that work has come from very reputable universities.”

But beating back one attack is no longer enough in today’s contentious climate, and the corn grower response has evolved from traditional steps to set the record straight into a variety of pre-emptive efforts to inform and educate people about agriculture and food before issues come to a head.

“We talked about how we were always on the defensive from people who didn’t understand modern agriculture,” says Darrin Ihnen, a South Dakota producer. “There was interest from all the states to get all the commodity groups in one room and agree on one message, and Rick Tolman was thinking of different ways to get everyone to come to the table.”

That thinking has led to ongoing NCGA outreach efforts like the Corn Farmers Coalition to inform decision makers in Washington, D.C., and to expanded media relations.

Grower leaders from rural communities have found themselves meeting with editors at *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.

“My most memorable interview was with CNN in April 2008,” says Ken McCauley from White Cloud, Kansas. “They brought a satellite truck to the farm at 4 a.m., and John Roberts and I talked about why corn prices are so high and why it wasn’t ethanol’s fault – it was speculators and energy prices. That interview is still out there on YouTube.

“I think our board and officers have become better spokesmen for agriculture as we’ve been attacked more,” McCauley adds. “There’s more board members ready to talk on behalf of corn than we’ve ever had before.”

NCGA’s leaders are also better prepared to speak for agriculture. “When I was liaison to the Grower Services Action Team, I threw out the idea of advanced media training,” explains Bart Schott, now an NCGA past president from North Dakota. “As officers, we felt like once-a-year media training was not enough. We need really good training and it’s better twice a year.”

Ihnen and Dickey also pushed for better media training. “Bob and I said we need to do tougher media training and once the officers did that, the board needs to do it as well, because you never know when you’ll be in front of the media.”



Darrin Ihnen



Ken McCauley



Standing up for agriculture has also meant traditional publications like the *Corn Fact Book*, social media efforts like the NCGA blog or the Corn Farmers Coalition website, along with newspaper and television advertising.

In the process, NCGA members like the Kurt Hora family from Washington, Iowa, are serving as the face of American corn production for the millions of consumers who no longer have any personal links to agriculture.

Most recently, NCGA's interest in bringing all of agriculture together led to the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance. Schott is one of USFRA's officers.

"It's all part of agriculture coming together and having an open dialogue with our consumers," he says. "We're really good at producing, but we haven't been as good at communication. This is going to open the door for consumers to ask questions and open a dialogue with producers about their food."



Bart Schott

"NCGA has been a leader [in making this happen]. This was a charge given to us officers at the Corn Congress," Schott explains. "We have about 60 ag production groups involved now – this is the first time this has ever happened. Once everyone saw the value of working together, it just picked up steam."

"Now, we're focused on some movement advertising campaigns. I think the next step will be a good positive message to consumers about how we raise the corn and produce the livestock," Ihnen says. "Looking back, if we could have done that 20 years ago, it could have made a difference today in how people see agriculture."

## Strategic Visioning Helps Organization Evolve Smartly

When Walter Goeppinger founded the National Corn Growers Association, he wanted it to be a self-help tool corn producers could use to plan for their industry's future. Since 1957, his two priorities – grower control and focusing on the challenges of the future – have become ingrained, and the NCGA has demonstrated an ongoing capacity for strategic thinking and change, as seen with major structural reorganizations in 1977 and 1998.





“The fact that we made the change – I think it was truly a result of the membership of the Corn Growers,” says Ryland Utlaut, the Missourian who presided over NCGA’s 1998 restructuring. “I think they were more forward-looking than some others.”

The same could be said of the 1977 reorganization, which created NCGA’s federation of state groups just as the first state corn checkoffs were being established.

While many agricultural checkoffs are governed by USDA-appointed boards, the corn checkoffs are all state-based, and almost all are governed by local growers elected by their fellow farmers.

The result today is a flexible structure of 28 state grower membership organizations and 23 state checkoffs that manage extensive state-specific programs, underpin NCGA’s broader national programs, and provide a conduit for moving grower concerns, funding, and proposals from local forums to the national level.



Ryland Utlaut

NCGA continued to evolve in the late 1970s and early 1980s, establishing standing committees, opening its first professional office, hiring Mike Hall as its first representative in Washington, D.C., moving its headquarters to St. Louis, and hiring Jeff Gain as its first CEO.

A major move in 1979 established the National Corn Development Foundation (NCDF) as a parallel national organization focused on research, market development, and related funding.

Such changes don’t come easily, and the 1998 reorganization was contentious, according to Utlaut.

“We were looking at \$1.50 corn and we knew we had to do something,” he remembers. “We were two organizations at the time – NCGA and NCDF – so our CEO Chris Wehrman along with the officers started talking about simplifying our structure. Traditions die hard, and it wasn’t unanimous with everyone, but we knew we needed to simplify and not be as expensive to run.”

With Wehrman’s guidance, NCGA initiated an industry discussion that created a vision for the corn industry, defined NCGA’s mission, and developed a strategic plan to position the organization as an integral part of the corn value chain.



“We looked at why don’t we put the two groups (NCGA and NCDF) together,” says Utlaut. “It was a very radical change, and it created bumps and bruises, but after many sessions, we think we got fair representation for all the states.”

Fair representation was especially critical, since the reorganization also led to a new committee structure (the action teams), a large Corn Congress where all member states are represented, and the creation of a new governing board, the Corn Board, with just 15 elected positions.

To achieve those results, “You’ve got to look at what’s best for all of us,” says Utlaut. As an example, he points to growers like Illinois’ Gene Youngquist for the efforts they made during the NCGA-NCDF consolidation.

“These kinds of people are the reason NCGA has earned the reputation it has,” he concludes.

Since 1998, NCGA grower leaders have continued to update the organization’s vision for the future.

Mark Schwiebert, an Ohio grower, served on a structure review committee in 2001 to look at the performance of the 1998 restructuring.



Mark Schwiebert

“It [the restructuring] didn’t sit on a shelf collecting dust,” says Schwiebert. “We reviewed it for any modifications that needed to be made. We looked at the action team structures and the revamping and asked ‘is this working?’”

Schwiebert went on to serve on NCGA’s Future Structures of Agriculture Task Force, an NCGA-led effort to look at the challenges and opportunities grain producers could face in the future.

“We didn’t think being complacent would get us where we wanted to get as farmers,” explains Schwiebert. “The thinking was we wanted to have folks gain a larger vision and see the opportunities that might be out there for us if we were bold enough to step forward and take some leadership roles.”

The task force produced two reports – the first, *Choices in the Evolution of Corn Belt Agriculture*, setting the stage, and the second, *Taking Ownership of Grain Belt Agriculture: How Producer Self-Reliance is Transforming Rural America*, providing concrete examples.

“After the first report, many people wanted us to dig a little deeper, illustrate real world examples of how other organizations have done it (taken ownership),” says Schwiebert.

“We put in some failed attempts too. You have to look at the opportunities and, yes, there are risks, but knowing what’s out there gives you a chance.”

Like Utlaut, Schwiebert credits the corn growers membership itself for the organization’s focus on the future.

“I think that’s kind of reflective of many members who tend to be forward-thinking individuals,” he says. “They are willing to look at fresh approaches because what we’re doing now is so different than in the past. That’s the lifeblood that has driven our organization forward over the years.”

Today, the NCGA and its members look to the future with a continuously evolving strategic plan whose mission is to create and increase opportunities for corn growers.



Gerald Tumbleson

Gerald Tumbleson, an NCGA past president from Minnesota, captures the ongoing strength of grower leadership and a strategic focus on the future: “One of the things that NCGA is so great about is it’s such a diverse area. There are so many ways we raise corn and different technologies to use it, and it’s exciting as you work to adjust to this. There’s a difference in how we approach things, but there’s always the same end game to create opportunities for corn farmers.”

## **Crumbling Infrastructure a Longtime Challenge for Growers**

Failing infrastructure, an emerging issue for many Americans, is hardly news for the NCGA. Corn growers have decades of experience working at the state and federal levels to improve the transportation systems that underpin modern agriculture, from rural roads and bridges, to railroads, and especially inland waterways.

Greg Guenther, a former NCGA Corn Board member from Illinois, remembers the early chapters of the waterways issue: “Rod Weinzierl [longtime executive director of Illinois Corn] called me one day. I’d been to just one meeting, and he said, ‘there’s this group called the Midwest Area River Coalition working on river issues, and I want you to go to their meeting and see if this is something corn growers should be involved in.’”



Greg Guenther

“So I went and listened, and at the end, I called Rod and said, ‘These guys are serious. I think we ought to talk to them.’”

The Illinois Corn Growers Association became one of the first commodity groups to join the Midwest Area River Coalition (MARC 2000) campaign for new, expanded locks on the Mississippi-Missouri system, and Illinois corn leaders advanced the issue to NCGA’s Corn Congress for consideration.

“Some of the other states didn’t see how improved locks would benefit them,” Guenther recounts. “We had a lot of meetings and showed how every time you break apart a tow to go through a lock, it costs, and if we can reduce that cost, it’s going to help reduce transportation costs.

“Our theme was ‘a rising tide lifts all ships – if you improve things on the river, it benefits everyone in the corn industry.’”

Improving the Mississippi and Illinois locks and dams quickly became an NCGA priority, and since then, Guenther has been to a lot of meetings, public and private, working on behalf of corn growers, not only for river improvements but on issues of river management.

Iowan Warren Kemper was also in the front lines on river issues.

“We used to go up to Washington, and NCGA members would visit in every congressional office. Five or six states of growers would team up and cover 40 or 50 offices in a day, two or three of us at a time.

“Usually the reception was good, because the staffers knew they would have to brief their bosses for the votes but they didn’t know anything about the river,” he recalls.

“It seemed like such an obvious thing,” says current NCGA President Garry Niemeyer, of Auburn, Ill., who also worked the locks issue. “We were trying to get the message to Congress that the locks were built for 50 years and were already 70 years old and crumbling.”

For years, corn growers organized barge tours of the locks so farmers, officials, and media could see the need first-hand.

“We had huge crowds,” Guenther remembers. “We would have speakers and do tours of the tow boat to familiarize people with the challenges of the river industry. One year we even had a fax machine set up for people to fax a message to their congressmen right then in support of the locks.





When opponents challenged the calculations underpinning the need for river improvements, it prompted a new strategy. “Everything we had done for four years just crumbled into the river,” Niemeyer remembers. “We just had to sit down and say, ‘What we’re doing isn’t working. How do we get where we need to be?’

“And we decided we needed to find someone else to build an alliance with.”

That decision led to coalition-building “outside of everybody’s comfort level,” he says.

“We decided to look into a labor union that would build the new locks, and the group that seemed most open to working with us was the carpenters union. We decided to take a chance to do this.”

It turned out to be a historic decision.

Niemeyer remembers walking into congressional offices with union representatives in the first joint lobbying effort in Washington: “Staff would look at us and say, ‘are you guys here together?’ And we said, ‘Yes, we are. We’ve formed a coalition and we want to build some locks.’”

The next step was harder: bringing environmental allies on board to support river improvements.

“They have a completely different agenda than we do,” says Guenther. “Some were adamantly opposed to any upgrades.”

At one contentious Corps meeting where other pro-improvement spokesmen played “good cop, bad cop” roles, Guenther’s assignment was to be the “voice of doom.”

His message: “There’s plenty of river and we can do all this [locks plus environmental programs] if we just pull together, but we’re going to do what it takes, and if there’s blood on the floor when we’re done, so be it – we’re going to get our locks.”

Finally in 2007, the Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy joined in supporting an NCGA plan that included extensive environmental restoration, and lock improvements were authorized as part of the Water Resources Defense Act (WRDA).



Kemper was there the day WRDA passed the House and Senate: “There was a bunch of amendments to try and kill it. I was outside at the elevator where the senators go up and down to thank all the ones who helped us.

“When WRDA finally went through the Senate, I was in the back row of the gallery and I just pumped my fist up in the air and said, ‘Yes!’”

NCGA won a second overwhelming victory in Congress after President Bush vetoed WRDA.

“We had 406 congressmen and 83 senators in support,” recounts Niemeyer. “You just don’t get support like that anymore on legislation.”

Yet today, NCGA is still battling for improved locks, this time in an effort to get funds to pay for the work – a task complicated by the recession and the drive to reduce government spending.

“When Obama was elected, we had spent a tremendous amount of time with him on locks and dams,” says a disappointed Niemeyer. “We thought it would be easy to work with his administration. Art Bunting and I went to D.C. to see if we could get funding [in the stimulus bill], only to find out they were only doling out money for shovel-ready projects.

“Because ours was not done with pre-engineering, we weren’t eligible.”

“I’m still fighting the battle, and we still haven’t got our locks,” says Guenther.

## **Trade Quietly Plays Critical Role in Supporting U.S. Corn Market**

Trade is critically important to U.S. corn growers’ balance sheets – just look at what happens to corn prices when export demand wanes – but trade issues never seem to take center stage the way ethanol or farm programs do.

As a result, NCGA’s sustained efforts in the trade arena are too often overlooked. But they are still essential.

Walter Goeppinger, NCGA’s founder, recognized the importance of trade. Within three years of establishing NCGA, he played a leading role in creating the U.S. Feed Grains Council (now the U.S. Grains Council) as a tool to develop export markets for U.S. corn.



Goeppinger, who presided over NCGA from 1957 to 1973, also served as the USFGC's first chairman in 1961.

Nearly 40 years later, Nebraska grower Bob Dickey, like Goeppinger, served in both roles -- USGC chairman in 1998 and NCGA president in 2009.

Dickey, whose mantra at the Grains Council was "exports move my markets," made better coordination between NCGA and the USGC a primary goal of his presidency, helped by the closer ties that developed after 2000, when Rick Tolman left a senior post at USGC to become NCGA's chief executive officer.



Rick Tolman

"We put together the Corn Vision 2012 to sit in on conference calls, sit in on each other's meetings, and have joint meetings," says Dickey. "Now we're housed together in Washington, DC. We've jointly rented space not far from the Capitol, and we have a common receptionist and use the office equipment together. We will share board rooms, and I think it will be a big success."

Close working relations between the two organizations are critically important to corn farmers because of the way their strengths dovetail.

The Council is pre-eminently a market development operation with overseas offices and representatives. Operating globally, it not only builds demand, it also provides market information and education and works with end users to remove trade barriers in importing nations.

It does not, however, lobby the U.S. Congress on U.S. trade policy because it receives matching funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and it is not structured to mobilize widespread grower involvement in trade issues the way NCGA can.

One of the essential but undramatic contributions NCGA makes to trade effort is making sure, year after year, that Congress appropriates funding for USDA's market development programs – not an easy task since the Market Access Program (MAP) is frequently targeted for budget cuts.

As part of the 2008 farm bill, the NCGA helped achieve \$200 million for the Market Access Program (MAP) and \$34.5 million for the Foreign Market Development (FMD) Program.

What gains far more attention is NCGA's role as the official representative for U.S. corn growers, providing testimony, lobbying Congress and the



administration, even taking legal action to defend U.S. exports in trade disputes, some of which extend over many years.

There are many examples, from NCGA's passionate protest against the Carter administration's 1980 embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union to mounting a legal defense against a Canadian challenge of U.S. commodity programs.

In the mid-1980s, when Spain and Portugal joined the European Union, NCGA contributed to an all-out negotiation effort that assured access to the Iberian market for up to two million tons (79 million bushels) of corn imports annually, until 1998 when a new dispute over biotechnology halted U.S. export sales.

As the U.S. corn economy and the trade environment have evolved, the NCGA's task has grown to encompass previously unimagined issues. NCGA has worked to halt the dumping of subsidized imported sugar into the U.S. domestic market and to prevent the misuse of U.S. ethanol incentives to benefit foreign producers.

Through the evolution of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) into the World Trade Organization (WTO), NCGA has pushed U.S. negotiators to develop trade rules that create a fair and level playing field for exports of U.S. corn and corn products.

Much of this work has been tedious and slow, and successes are rarely dramatic. Two examples illustrate, however, how important NCGA's work on trade is.

First, the passage of NAFTA has been an unparalleled victory for U.S. corn farmers. From a modest and unpredictable market that averaged just 76 million bushels of purchases, Mexico is now consistently the No. 2 U.S. export customer, with 325 million bushels in imports in 2009/10.

The second example is Colombia, where USGC market development programs turned a negligible market (less than 1.3 million bushels in 1990/91) into a major customer for U.S. corn. By 2006/07, Colombia was buying 125 million bushels.

Then, while approval of a U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was delayed again and again, Colombia's trade pact with other corn exporters like Argentina and Brazil began to ratchet down Colombia's tariffs on their corn shipments.





Over several years, the U.S. price advantage eroded, and so did U.S. sales to Colombia. From marketing year 2007/08 through 2009/10, U.S. corn exports drastically dropped 78 million bushels, which is an estimated loss of \$475 million.

“NCGA worked really hard on them [the Colombia, Panama, and South Korea free trade agreements],” says Bart Schott, the North Dakota grower who was NCGA president in 2010/11.

“I was really hoping to add approval of the free trade agreements to what we achieved when I was president. I talked to Ambassador Kirk in December 2010, and he thought we’d get it done in January or February,” Schott remembers. It’s one of those things that is going to help us and help the livestock industry even more.”

Under pressure from NCGA and an array of U.S. commodity groups, Congress finally passed the Colombia FTA in October 2011, a bare two weeks after Schott stepped down as NCGA president.

Beyond its contribution as corn growers’ official representative, NCGA plays a growing role as “the face of the American corn grower” around the world. In the last decade, NCGA and USGC have worked more closely than ever to answer trade concerns and educate foreign consumers about questions from the most basic -- how is corn grown? -- to the most critical -- is the corn safe to eat? Will there be enough to feed our consumers?

Whether welcoming international groups to their farms or traveling abroad to answer speak for the industry, NCGA leaders are in the forefront of providing the answers.

## **NCGA a Longtime Leader on Farm Policy Innovation**

From NCGA’s earliest days, long before issues like ethanol or biotechnology arose, farm policy has been at the top of the association’s priority list.

Farm policy was a “natural” for organization founder Walter Goeppinger, who made a point of working with presidents and congressional leaders of both parties on behalf of corn growers. His close relations in government and his stature as a spokesman for growers established an NCGA tradition of initiative and effectiveness in farm policy debates.



That tradition has continued with each farm bill since Goeppinger's day and spread into additional issues as U.S. farm policy evolved.

In 1965, NCGA went to Congress backing a new concept: a four-year extension of the farm bill's feed grain section to eliminate the need to revisit it annually. That ushered in the modern pattern of farm bill consideration and renewal.

NCGA and Goeppinger were also leaders in developing coalitions to back farm policy, bringing together some 500 people from 32 groups to strategize for the 1970 farm bill.

By 1982, NCGA had gained such stature in the policy world that President Ronald Reagan came to Des Moines to keynote the association's annual meeting.

Varel Bailey, another NCGA president, remembers the role corn growers played in hammering out details of the 1985 farm bill at a meeting with Sen. Bob Dole of Kansas, then chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

"We went over the fact that the bill made major changes but no one had put the pieces together to make them work. Senator Dole turned to Gordley [his chief of staff] and said, 'You guys work it out and tell me what you decide.' I thought Gordley would go to the committee staff to work out the details, but instead he told Mike Hall [NCGA's lobbyist] and me to meet him at the Monocle Restaurant in an hour.

"At the restaurant, he had rounded up the lobbyist for the wheat growers to join us, and we started going over the farm bill – no set-aside, a new Conservation Reserve Program, set target prices and loan rates, and a marketing loan using some left-over pieces of the PIK program.

"It was like trying to put a puzzle together where the size of each piece is determined by the size of the other pieces. Finally, I excused myself and called FAPRI and told Abner Womack we needed help deciding the size of the CRP, target prices, loan rates, and estimates of net farm income. We did some figuring on what the optimum relationships should be, and I went back to the table and announced that the CRP should be 42 million acres and the corresponding loan rates and target prices, and Gordley said, 'We are going with these numbers.'"

Farm bill after farm bill, NCGA's effectiveness has rested on the bedrock of grower involvement. That was evident a decade later, when Freedom to Farm was the hot, new farm bill topic.

"You talk about getting calls," says Ryland Utlaut, who chaired NCGA's policy committee at the time. "I got calls from all over the U.S. There was a national debate and we were looking at a radical change."

"It was a very, very vigorous debate within NCGA about our position, about what direction NCGA should go," Dee Vaughan remembers. "Some states wanted to increase the loan rate and some wanted to go with [Senator Pat] Roberts' new structure, but in the end we agreed to support the new farm program."

In 2007, corn growers went beyond influencing farm policy to originating the one major new concept in the farm bill: ACRE, the Average Crop Revenue Election program.

"There's been an evolution since 1993 of how crop insurance has changed from direct payments to risk management, and that is still going on," says Ron Litterer, NCGA's 2007 president. "What led to that was the farm bill study team that Iowa Corn Growers started with all the commodities and Farm Bureau."



Ron Litterer

Early in the farm bill renewal process, NCGA was the only commodity group pushing ACRE.

"ACRE says that direct payments are not that important," he remembers. "Farmers are pretty conservative, so in the whole evolution of crop insurance and revenue insurance, there have been regional and crop differences."

Still, "on farm bill, corn was the driver," he says. "Keith Sexton and I met with the Iowa Farm Bureau after [Iowa State professor] Dermot Hayes told them, 'you need to listen to these guys.'"



Keith Sexton

"We had to compromise to get a foothold in the debate, and by doing that, we broadened our base of support. Because we were able to give on direct payments and move from a county to a state-wide trigger on price, it meant the coverage pretty much worked better for high risk situations."

Like so many NCGA leaders, Litterer continues to look forward more than back. "ACRE gave us a political chance to work with the National Farmers Union's SURE program. SURE has no baseline but ACRE does. It should be possible to mold those two into one simplified program."



Pam Johnson

NCGA Vice President Pam Johnson is also looking forward to the next farm program battle: “I think the biggest challenge/opportunity will be developing policy at a time when no extra federal dollars are available. So coming to the table with a clear priority about what corn growers need will be the challenge for NCGA.

“We will have to ask ourselves the hard questions, ‘What does our federal government need to invest in agriculture? How important is it that we have food and energy security?’

“At the last Commodity Classic, we said agriculture has already looked at reform, and we’re willing to make changes, but let’s make sure everyone is there with the same attitude,” she says.

“The thing that is important for the next few years is to remember that high crop prices are short-term. We need to make long-term decisions that are wise, and we need to remember that agriculture is the backbone of our country.”

## **Research Key to New Corn Uses and Markets**

Feb. 28, 2008, a red-letter day for modern corn production, also marked what may be the National Corn Growers Association’s greatest research achievement to date.

It was the day scientists from Washington University’s Genome Research Center announced the completion of a working draft of the corn genome – a breakthrough expected to accelerate the production of new corn hybrids, allow researchers to develop better varieties without using genetic modification, and exploit corn’s exceptional diversity.

Fifty years ago, NCGA’s leading role in such a multi-year effort would have been as hard to imagine as the gene mapping technology itself.

Scientific research is both time-consuming and expensive, and in its early days, NCGA lacked the resources to pursue serious research.

Only after 1977, when the first state corn checkoffs were established, did the outlook for better research funding begin to change, but with smaller corn crops (just 6.5 billion bushels in 1977), checkoff collection rates as low as one-tenth cent per bushel, and the competition among projects for scarce dollars, progress was slow.





It wasn't until 1979 that NCGA received its first checkoff donation -- \$4,000 from the Corn Growers Association of North Carolina. Not surprisingly, NCGA's early research efforts were modest and its ability to leverage producer dollars into a large research investment was limited.

### *Research Conference*

An important research development was the National Corn Utilization Project, cosponsored by Funk Seeds International, which evolved into the first Corn Utilization & Technology Conference in 1996.

Held every other year, the CUTC filled a need no one else had addressed. Today it has grown into a premier event in the corn industry, increasingly recognized as an important international forum for growers, scientists, agribusiness, and international experts to exchange ideas and learn the latest developments in corn research and technology.

For NCGA, which couldn't invest the millions of dollars typical of corporate research budgets, it was just one example of building a meaningful research program by coordinating with partners.

"When I got involved [in research] the focus was through the universities," remembers Iowan Vic Miller. "We would send our requests for proposals to the land grant schools, the big state universities with an ag-related focus."

"At the start, we paid a lot of professors' salaries without getting a large reward. The research wasn't focused on things that moved the ball for production agriculture."

Even so, some projects delivered important benefits. NCGA funded research on controlling aflatoxin, for example. Another success was an NCGA-backed review of the scientific research on ethanol and air pollution that provided crucial evidence for a California court case challenging ethanol's use in oxygenated fuel.

As funding resources increased and grower leaders developed more experience targeting research efforts, the NCGA research program expanded into more projects that supported grower initiatives like ethanol.



By the time Gene Fynboh, a Minnesota grower, got involved, much of the research emphasis was ethanol-related.

“I got involved because I didn’t like the price of corn,” Fynboh recalls, “I was looking to get more control over our destiny by adding value to the crop. That was about the time the Minnesota Corn Processors established a grower-owned wet mill, and it piqued my curiosity because it was farmers taking control of their own product. We could process it to make it more valuable.

“In research we were looking at efficiencies [with ethanol] and some pilot projects in fractionation,” Fynboh remembers. “It was an idea that had to be explored and it became the basis of the research – learning what it took to process corn for its best values.”

### *Getting Strategic*

By the 1990s, NCGA research was becoming more strategic.

“Everybody began to realize that none of us has enough money to compete with GM, Kellogg, ADM, the truly large players in production agriculture,” Miller tells. “We were looking for nuggets and not finding them. We began to shift focus from strictly university research into the commercial structure.”

What NCGA did have was its lobbying strength. Miller cites one example: “It became evident to Pacific Northwest Labs that it was important to have NCGA on board with a project. The association was valuable because NCGA could build government support for research. That led to us rolling into commercial alliances.”

In 1997, NCGA spearheaded the creation of a major plant genome research effort. This effort led to the corn genome mapping project, which brought together the National Science Foundation (NSF), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Energy (DOE) and NCGA for a multi-year campaign starting in 2005.

“We contributed to that effort because everybody understood that we were all in this together and we have to do what would benefit everybody. We could still carve out our own little piece [of research] at the state level, but our piece would be more valuable if we worked together on the big effort,” Miller remembers.



Pam Johnson, research committee chair at the time, found herself speaking at an international maize genetics conference and testifying before congressional committees to help decision makers understand what sequencing the corn genome could mean for farmers.

“You need to connect the people in the laboratory with the people who will benefit from the research,” says Johnson, now NCGA first vice president. “It opened my eyes to what it takes to get funding for science.”

By the time the draft genome sequence was released in February 2008, the Plant Genome Research Program (PGRP) had reached a budget of more than \$101 million in public and private funding.

“It was a historic event, and one of the biggest things to happen to our industry,” says Johnson. “Now we can take everything we know about growing corn and lay it on top of this gene map and understand our data – that’s how big this is.

“The genome is just the beginning of good things to come,” she concludes. “I’ve been to plant genome conferences each year with people from around the world, and when we look at what nine billion people will need in 2050, this research will help corn growers participate in supplying those needs.”

NCGA’s support of plant genomics continues as the work evolves from information to application. The Research and Business Development Action Team is currently focusing on making the wealth of genetics and genomics data available through its support of the Maize Genome Database and establishing a National Agricultural Genotyping Center. Both efforts will help to translate scientific discoveries into solutions for production agriculture, food safety, functional foods, bioenergy and national security.”

## **Ethanol an Important Market Corn Growers Helped Create**

The ethanol story, fully told, would showcase every aspect of NCGA – the dedication of thousands of grower members, the strategic thinking, state level initiatives, policy work, research, infrastructure, sustainability, even aspects of NCGA’s biotechnology effort – and it would take a whole book.



Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, an ethanol supporter since the 1970s, remembers some of the earliest corn grower efforts to promote ethanol: “They would come with a gravity box with corn and a sign about ethanol, urging support.

“Without the corn growers, we would not have an ethanol policy. Other farm organizations have been generally supportive of ethanol as well, but the corn growers have played the leading role.

“Not only have they made a difference from the standpoint of policy, but also they have been very involved in making sure the ethanol tax credits were extended.”

Yet even in recent years, progress never came easily.

“One of the big issues that marked my term as NCGA president was the first energy bill with the Renewable Fuels Standard,” says Dee Vaughan from Texas. “We didn’t put anything over the finish line, but we made a lot of trips to Washington and did a lot of down-in-the-trenches work on that bill.

“It was a very slow process and probably the top issue we worked on.”

“George Bush was president,” remembers Fred Yoder, “and he got Congress to pass the drug prescription program as part of Medicare. The Democrats didn’t want to give him another ‘win’ so we were two votes shy of passing the energy bill, but the groundwork was laid down and we got it passed two years later.”

“The second energy bill was monumental,” recalls Ken McCauley. “It just exploded our demand for corn and our prices.

“The day it was going through the House of Representatives was the day I went to the White House Christmas party. I was talking with President Bush and thanking him for helping ethanol, and he said, ‘I’ll do more if you get Pelosi to come around.’

“To have a real conversation with the President of the United States and to have him on our side was just amazing.”

Over the years, NCGA’s ethanol success has paid off in countless ways, from cleaner fuels and less dependence on limited oil imports to grower ownership of value-added corn processing.





Its growing use has been the single biggest factor helping corn demand keep pace with growing production. Every time a U.S. grower sells corn into the marketplace, his price is better because of ethanol-related demand.

Growers who can sell to a nearby ethanol plant typically enjoy an even better price boost, and the dream of the 1970s – growers profiting from adding value to their crop – is becoming “old hat” for the thousands of grower-investors in today’s 200 corn-based ethanol plants.

Then there’s the broader economic benefit in rural communities. One study in 2010 estimated the U.S. ethanol industry supported nearly 400,000 jobs in all sectors of the economy and added more than \$53 billion to the nation’s gross domestic product.

“There was nothing that really matched what ethanol did for us,” concludes Gene Fynboh, a Minnesota grower.

“Once we got the original RFS, that started a revolution for us from a supply-driven and government-driven corn economy to the demand-driven economy we have today,” says Yoder.

Now, growers are in a position to celebrate the successes that have come from almost 50 years of sustained efforts for ethanol, but the effort isn’t over.

“Two years ago, Darrin Ihnen, Dave Nelson, Rick Tolman and I went to Brazil and toured one of their new sugar plants,” says Ron Litterer. “They were awash in ethanol, and here, two years later, they’ve converted ethanol plants back to sugar and are importing ethanol from us.

“I came back knowing we need to get the blend wall issue sorted out.”

Ethanol continued to be a top priority for South Dakota’s Ihnen when he served as president from 2009 to 2010:

“One of the highlights of my time was working to get the ethanol groups to talk to each other – the Renewable Fuels Association and Growth Energy. It seems like every day I was on the phone to them. It was one of the big milestones of my year,” he says.

As ethanol’s role in the nation’s fuel supply has expanded, NCGA leaders have expanded efforts to promote ethanol (including the E15 blend) to a national audience. That has led to a major new outreach effort – the



Dave Nelson



NASCAR American Ethanol partnership.

"NASCAR is turning out to be one of the biggest and most exciting programs to showcase ethanol and reach people," says Bart Schott, NCGA's 2010-2011 president.

"They have tens of millions of race fans, so it's a great way to promote ethanol-blended fuel to the consumer – it's been a big home run for ethanol and for corn growers, with a lot of press coverage and exposure. 'Each car has it printed over the fuel port, where it says 'American Ethanol.' With every race, we get exposure for the E15 blend.

"As they go from Daytona to Richmond to Kansas City, it's as if every weekend they put on a Superbowl with 100,000 to 150,000 fans at the races," he says.

Will NCGA continue to succeed on the ethanol front? The answer, as always, will depend on grower involvement, grower commitment.

"Nothing we've done is just one person," says Yoder. "It's always a team that makes progress."

## **NCGA Leadership Helps Biotech Efforts Advance Prudently**

When the biotechnology revolution hit the U.S. corn industry, it did more than change the way people farmed. For NCGA, it changed the roles grower leaders had to play if they were going to represent their members effectively.

"With biotech, early on we could see this was something new," says Leon Corzine, who chaired NCGA's Biotechnology Working Group before becoming an NCGA officer.

"The biotechnology providers were pushing it out to the farmers, and from a farmer perspective, a lot were excited about what biotech could do. But we could see there were marketplace concerns with this new technology and acceptance was an issue," he recalls.

"NCGA had to tell the providers, 'We know this is great technology, but you've got to take it slower.'"

Established in 2000, the working group was initially just four growers with help from two staff members, he remembers.

“We saw the huge potential in biotech, and we had a good understanding in the working group that it had to be a ‘plus’ for corn growers, agriculture and our country, but we knew we wouldn’t get the technology if it couldn’t come to market. That left us walking a tight line.”

Fred Yoder, an Ohio grower, served as the working group’s first chairman. “One thing corn did was really different from soybeans’ approach,” Yoder says. “Soybeans went to the European Union and got Roundup Ready beans okayed, but they had to agree to no more after that.

“When the corn growers faced the *Bt* corn issue, we knew the next generation [of biotech seed] was going to be a vast improvement, so we couldn’t make the same kind of agreement. I think that was a real key to get the technology going in corn. The companies were willing to invest in the research because they knew in the end they would have a market,” Yoder concludes.

“And if we couldn’t export the corn everywhere, we could begin channeling, and we could move forward working with Japan’s approval system. The EU just got left behind.”

As the debate over biotechnology grew, NCGA took on multiple new challenges.

“At one point, people were planting [biotech seed with partial approval] who didn’t even know it,” says Corzine. “Farmers didn’t know the importance of paying attention to biotech regulations.”

Soon, the NCGA was promoting the Know Before You Grow program to inform growers about responsible marketing. Year by year, a concerted effort by NCGA and the state grower associations provided up-to-the-minute data on the regulatory status of biotech hybrids at meetings, in printed materials, and on the Internet. Novecta, an initiative launched by the Iowa and Illinois state associations, offered training and certification for growers who wanted to grow higher-value corn hybrids and channel the output into specific markets.

NCGA also helped growers who faced damages because cross-contamination had made their crop less marketable, providing information



Leon Corzine



on approved marketing and use alternatives, and keeping pressure on genetics companies to respond to problems through a user-friendly process.

At the same time, NCGA's influence with other powers in the biotechnology debate was growing.

StarLink was the first biotechnology product with split approval – approved for use in feed but not in food – Corzine explains. “That became a huge issue, and it cost us market share.

“We had told the regulators, ‘Don’t allow commercial sales until we have full approval in the U.S. and major export markets.’ And we had told the seed industry about the risks. We were almost prophets in that respect, and it brought us credibility and leverage. Going forward, we could say, ‘This is what you’re going to do, and this is what will or won’t work on the farm.’”

With each step forward, NCGA leaders built on what they had learned to prevent a repeat experience. Every year, they met not just with the technology providers in the seed industry but with the start-up companies doing basic research in genetics.

“Those folks wanted to know what corn growers needed,” says Corzine.

Working with the U.S. Grains Council, NCGA also reached out to foreign customers alarmed or confused about the new technology – and not just to the major export markets, like Japan and Mexico. In one year alone, Yoder traveled to Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Austria to represent America’s corn growers at biotechnology discussions.

Beginning in 2003, NCGA and the council launched a major initiative to reach key decision makers around the world. Not limited to grain buyers, the International Biotechnology Information Conference brought foreign journalists, regulators, scientists and opinion leaders to the heart of the U.S. Corn Belt each autumn to learn the science and facts underpinning biotechnology.

The program, which ran until 2010, exposed participants to each step of the production process: seed company, farm, grain terminal, processing plant, and supermarket shelves. By 2009, hundreds of leaders from more than 70 nations had gone home with a deeper understanding of biotechnology. The result has been a growing cadre of influential leaders

worldwide who are better prepared to make rational choices about biotechnology use and regulations.

In the 11 years since the StarLink controversy erupted, as the biotechnology debate has continued, NCGA has become an established leader on the issue.

Corzine summarizes another reason NCGA has been so effective: “We are able to represent a federation of states, a big block of farmers. We send producers to the meetings who can sit down with the heads of companies, with the Environmental Protection Agency, with the U.S. Congress and talk the issue. “Any questions on production, we can answer. We can say, ‘This is important to me as a farmer.’ It’s important that they know we are farmers speaking for farmers. The biotechnology effort helped brand NCGA with that label. Even within NCGA, we didn’t realize early on how important that would be.”

## Growers Lead the Way as Sustainability Grows in Importance

Ken McCauley remembers getting Maryland’s Jamie Jamison to tackle the sustainability issue during McCauley’s term as NCGA president: “I remember him telling me, ‘this is not fun.’ At that time, people just didn’t want to talk about the issue.”



Jamie Jamison

Times have changed, and sustainability has become an important issue for the National Corn Growers Association, and with good reason, according to Don Glenn, the Alabama grower who serves as vice chair of the Production and Stewardship Action Team.

“So much of what is being brought forward from outside agriculture is practice-based,” says Glenn. “If you do A, B, C, and D, you’ll be labeled ‘sustainable.’



Don Glenn

“We think yield and production need to be factored in. If you don’t produce enough to feed the world, it’s not sustainable. And you have to be financially sustainable. If the farmer can’t afford to feed and educate his children, it’s not sustainable.”

McCauley offers another argument for NCGA’s deeper involvement in the issue: “Sustainability is being elevated at the processor and retailer level. A lot of companies have sustainability efforts, and they have to write in





something about how the meat was produced, and that means they have to account for how the grain was produced.

“The grain buyer is plugging in numbers to satisfy the next level in the value chain, whether we know it or not. We can’t afford that – if somebody else is doing the counting, you don’t know if you’re getting credit for all you’re doing.”



Gary Edwards

NCGA’s sustainability agenda is advancing through two major projects: Field to Market: The Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture and the National Initiative for Sustainable Agriculture (NISA), both of which are significantly producer-driven.

“Field to Market started about four years ago with funding from major commodity groups like NCGA,” says Glenn. “It’s very much production-based, not just a list of practices. It involves being more efficient with our assets and it looks at both practices and increased yields.”

Gary Edwards, an Iowa grower, is NCGA’s point man for the Field to Market project.

“We started with discussions of what is sustainability,” Edwards explains. “You have to look at the differences between 20 years ago and now and decide how we measure whether something is an improvement or not.”

That research led to Field to Market’s first report in 2009, which showed that from 1987 to 2007, per-bushel U.S. corn production became much more sustainable, reducing land needs by 37 percent, soil loss by 69 percent, irrigation by 27 percent, energy use by 37 percent and emissions by 30 percent.

To help farmers, “we decided to come up with a calculator you can use to calculate your sustainability right now, then calculate what you can do to improve it,” says Edwards.

The result is a matrix that allows farmers to look at the relationship among multiple factors.

“We have done the work on land use, sediment loss, greenhouse gas emissions, irrigated water usage, and energy use,” he reports. “It was just released online on January 1.



“The calculator isn’t complete yet. We are still working on biodiversity and the water quality matrix – it’s very difficult and that’s why it’s not done – and we haven’t started yet on socio-economic and health metrics.”

The calculator includes several other features important to growers: It is free, it allows them to keep farm data secured and private, and it allows them to test the effect of environmental decisions on management costs.

“It works for corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, and cotton,” notes Edwards.

“We’re trying to show how sustainable farming is and that we can meet the standards.”

The NISA project also began with growers, according to McCauley, who tells how he became involved.

“I was one of very few grain producers that worked with the Leonardo Group. They wanted to create a sustainability standard: If you do this and this, you are sustainable. Farming is just not like that. There are too many variables. Anyway, at one meeting they showed their hand, and we left and formed NISA.”

NISA’s goal is to develop a roadmap of farm management systems that growers can tap into to achieve sustainable results – and verify them. It also aims to provide a common playing field, regardless of crop or location and to offer science-based, regionally appropriate tools.

The NISA model system, tentatively scheduled for roll-out by late 2012, is being refined by growers like McCauley.



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