



Checking in with CenUSA

Sustainable Production and Distribution of Bioenergy for the Central US

CenUSA Bioenergy is a multidisciplinary project funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture-National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA Initiative Competitive Grant No. 2011-68005-30411). CenUSA's goal is to research the production and use of perennial grasses on marginal lands for use as alternative biofuels and bioproducts. More information is available at www.cenusa.iastate.edu.

Denny Harding, Bio-Economy Manager for the Iowa Farm Bureau and a CenUSA advisory board member, spoke about his experience on the project with CenUSA Communications Intern Tyler Worsham in June 2019 about how he provided CenUSA with the integral input and perspective of Iowa farmers.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/denny-harding-6a39b35/>.¹

How and why did you come to join the CenUSA advisory board?

“When it was first being put together, I believe CenUSA approached the (Iowa) Farm Bureau so they could have a representative of Iowa's farming community. The Iowa Farm Bureau is the largest general farm association in Iowa, so I was asked to join the advisory board to bring the perspective of farmers.”

Could you give a brief description of your professional background?

“After graduating from Iowa State University, I taught vocational agriculture for four years. After that, I worked for what at that time was called the Iowa Development Commission where I worked on economic development projects. I returned to the farm in 1985 where I farmed for 15 years. In 1999, I got out of active farming and leased the farmland to a young farmer. This allowed me to work for the Iowa Farm Bureau in the Research and Commodity Services division.

I worked with our farmer members on developing projects that add value for farmers. The biggest involvement was probably working with farmers on the development of the ethanol industry in Iowa, specifically farmer-owned ethanol plants. We later got involved in farmer-owned bio-diesel



Collectively, we brought a real-world perspective to the project. *Denny Harding*

¹ All of the words and ideas expressed in this interview fairly and accurately represent the speaker. Some quotes may be paraphrased for brevity and clarity. The opinions expressed in herein do not necessarily reflect those of Iowa State University, USDA-NIFA, Purdue University, Ohio State University, USDA-ARS, the University of Minnesota, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, the University of Vermont, or the University of Wisconsin.

plants, farmer-owned wind farms and other energy related projects.”

Have you advised for any other research projects, and if so, what did you do?

“Well, I was on the advisory committee for MASBI, the Midwest Aviation Sustainable Biofuel Initiative. That project was put together in part by USDA, but also the Navy, United Airlines, Boeing Corps. and others to look into the development of sustainable biofuels for air-transportation. I also served as an advisor to the Iowa State University Department of Animal Science, as well as to the BioCentury Research Farm at Iowa State.”

How did your background and previous advisory experience inform your approach on the CenUSA advisory board?

“Our experiences in the early stages of developing the renewable fuels industry were similar to the challenges facing the CenUSA project. It’s interesting doing the research and discovery phase, but the real challenge is bringing things to the table that make sense financially. The main thing is if there is an opportunity for farmers to get involved, have a new commodity that can be sold in a market and can make a profit.”

How did the project challenge and broaden your professional knowledge and skill set?

The fact that we were looking at switchgrass as an alternative for producing biofuels sort of broadened my perspective. Looking back at the ethanol industry, it’s based on an existing commodity in an existing market with an existing infrastructure. The challenge for CenUSA was coming up with a new infrastructure and uses for products made from switchgrass. It (switchgrass)

didn’t have an existing infrastructure for the fuel and energy industry.”

What specific project objectives do you think uniquely benefited most from your knowledge and experience?

“It’s been a while since we’ve had hands-on meetings, but looking back, the other advisory board members and I always brought the perspective of how things can get done. ‘What usable energy products can be developed from switchgrass for this market?’”



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How did the advisory board as a whole influence the direction of CenUSA and the leadership?

“I think that as a whole, this advisory board was very involved. The advisory board member actively raised questions as the project developed. This board can be proud of its involvement.”

What do you think was the most important contribution that the advisory board made to the overall CenUSA project, if you could distill it down to one thing that was most important?

“Collectively, we brought a real-world perspective to the project.”

In what way?

“Advisory board members kept asking what is the market potential for the products produced by this project.”

What do you hope will come out of CenUSA?

“It’s laid a lot of good and positive groundwork. I think there’s potential in a new industry being developed that is broadening the scope of opportunities for farmers by using the information we learned through this project. I think new industry potential is probably the biggest thing to come out of it.”

How will you take your CenUSA experience and apply it in the future? Alternatively, how do you think the experience of CenUSA might be applied to future research projects independent of your involvement?

“I’m retired now. I think it’s kind of like the space program in that back in the 60s, people thought ‘we needed to orbit the earth and go to the moon,’ but in the process of reaching those long-term goals, there were a lot of things that were discovered along the way that benefited society. I almost look at this in the same way. This experience has laid out some things that may bring benefits to other related industries.”

Learn more about CenUSA at www.cenusa.iastate.edu

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