



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). The goal of the project 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.



Bryan Melage¹, owner of a Nebraska farm equipment dealership and tractor repair business spoke with CenUSA Communications intern Tyler Worsham in July 2019 about his contributions to the CenUSA advisory board from the perspective of someone involved in agriculture from a very young age.² Melage used his business acumen and his experience in farming and equipment maintenance to provide a sense of capitalistic practicality to the research effort.

How and why did you join the CenUSA Advisory Board?

"It was very exciting to be rubbing elbows with the professors who not only have the knowledge and intelligence in their background, but also with all of the young people who had so much drive and energy looking at the world they're going to inherit and how we can make things work."

"I know some people at the University of Nebraska. They recommended me and gave that inside connection, I guess. I honestly didn't know about CenUSA until the University of Nebraska contacted me, told me about it and asked me if I wanted to do it."

Could you give a description of what you do in your professional background?

"I kind of grew up in the farming world. My family owns farmland, so I'm very familiar with farming. I grew up in the family business of farm repair, so we work on farm equipment. When I became old enough, I took over the business. I own a farm tractor repair business, so I'm very familiar with farming and very interested in renewable energy. I do a lot of stuff along those lines, so I guess my background is in farming, leaning toward renewable energy."

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

"No I have not. This is my first opportunity to do it at this level. I guess I could have always stood

¹ Learn more about Bryan Melage at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/bryanmelage/>

² 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.

on a street corner and stated my opinions, but as far as being on a board on this level and magnitude, no, I have not.”

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

“I think what I brought to the table that was the most valuable was my business experience. This is a college setting. There were so many colleges that were a part of this, and each of them had a discipline on which they were working. They were looking at it from the classroom and from the laboratory looking out, and being from the outside, from a capitalist, self-employed business person, I brought the perspective that ‘this is all great, but how are we going to make money with it?’ I think that my insight from being a business person brought some pretty good thoughts and ideas to people who were trying to make it happen on the scientific side. We still have to survive in the marketplace, and that’s where I exist.”

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

“It was very exciting to be rubbing elbows with the professors who not only have the knowledge and intelligence in their background, but also with all of the young people who had so much drive and energy looking at the world they’re going to inherit and how we can make things work. It was really exciting to be around people with ideas and the willingness to try to find out what’s going to work in this field. It was very exciting for me to see all of that.”

“...what I would like to see would be marketplace ideas that result in a company doing something with this and making money with it. Until some company makes money with it, it’s just ideas on a term paper.”

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

“There were 10 or 12 objectives. I can’t remember which one it was, but the whole CenUSA idea was to figure out how to make it work and figure out how to transform that into true business ideas in the marketplace. To go back, I think what I brought to it was that business experience. I can’t remember which particular project objective it was (Objective 10: Commercialization), but I helped take it to feasible marketplace ideas. That’s where I come in.”

How was the advisory board as a whole able to influence the direction of the project?

“I would like to think that it was an integral part of the whole effort. I don’t think that any one thing was any better than the other. I think it was a quality team effort from the people doing the paperwork to the people in the laboratory, the student interns and the advisory board. I think it was a good mix in the team. Everyone did their part, and I think that the advisory board was just one very solid, integral cog in the wheel that helped give it that holistic view. We needed that.

CenUSA was trying to be this holistic project from chalkboard idea to marketplace setting, and it took everybody’s input. I think the board was one of those things that helped give it that worldly view. The advisory board wasn’t bigger or more important than anyone else. It was just one of the important things that made it work.”

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

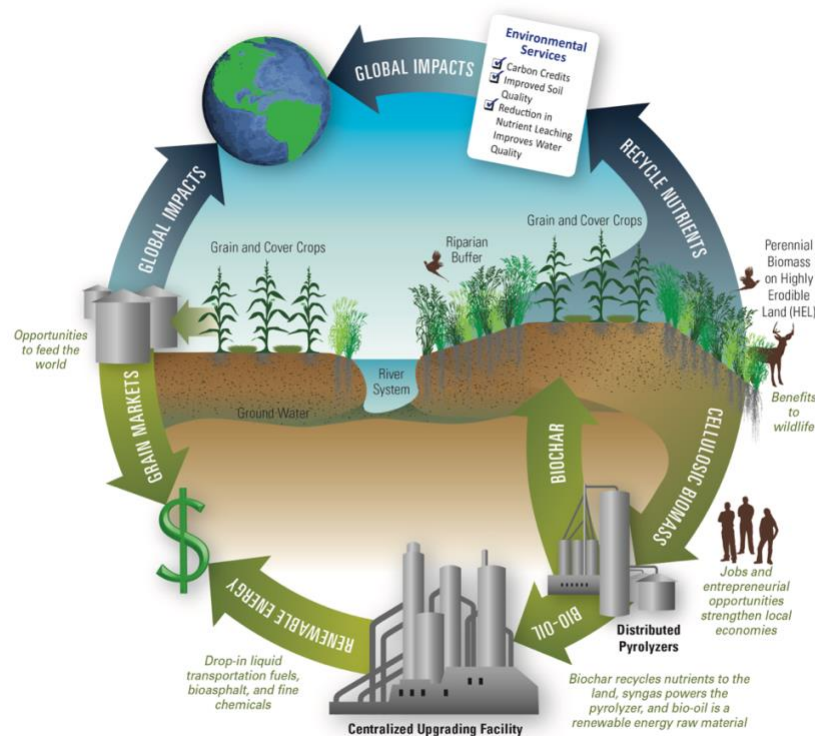
“They helped make a path to the marketplace.”

What do you hope will come of CenUSA?

“I think there are a couple things that come to my mind. I hope we’ve proven that these things work and that there are pathways to the marketplace and business ideas and applications. I think that was the goal of the whole thing, and we proved it can happen, so what I would like to see would be marketplace ideas that result in a company doing something with this and making money with it. Until some company makes money with it, it’s just ideas on a term paper. It’s a thesis that makes for nice reading, but unless someone can make money with it, it’s not going to survive in the marketplace.”

How might you take your experience with CenUSA and apply it to future work?

“I have business ideas on which I would like to work, ideas of which I had no knowledge until I was a part of CenUSA.”



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

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