



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.

John Weiss spoke about his work and involvement with CenUSA in the areas of feedstock development and sustainable feedstock production systems with CenUSA Communications Tyler Worsham.¹ A primary focus of discussion was on how Weiss used his outside perspective as a civilian to help inform the decision-making processes of the project and to highlight the importance of profitability.



"It sure is about return on investment! If I can't make money doing this, I'm not going to do it. Do you do things on which you don't make any money? *John Weiss Photo: CenUSA Bioenergy*

Why and how did you come to join the CenUSA advisory board?

"I'll make this as short as possible. My daughter made contact with one of the professors on the board to help her with her science fair project. She was doing an agronomy soil modification project instead, and I could only do so much to help her, so she reached out to various people from universities. He (the advisory board member) couldn't help her, either, he got to know us because of that. He was already on the board, and they needed a civilian. I ended up being that civilian. They nominated me, so I accepted. CenUSA eventually ended up renting a few acres from me for one of their demonstration plots. Would you like for me to explain it?"

Yes. That leads into the second question. Could you go into further detail about your professional background and how it might have played into your role on the advisory board?

"Well, I grew up on a farm and farmed for many years as an adult, and I've worked in horticulture for the rest of my working career, so I'm very familiar with cover crops and general agricultural practices

even though I'm a civilian who isn't connected to a university. They thought I could bring a farmer's perspective, and that's what I tried to do."

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.

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

“No, I haven’t advised other research projects.”

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

“I learned a whole lot more about their involvement in what they’re doing. I have a lot of native grasses planted around here, so I’ve learned about how to manage those. I learned about the problems facing corporations to turn these native grasses into a usable product, whether it be oil, chemicals, sugars or whatever else they’re trying to make, as well as how they can make a profit doing it. There’s the logistics of the whole thing, getting the raw material to a processing facility and everything that this entails. I learned a lot, and I tried to bring a producer’s perspective to what they were talking about doing.”

What was the most important input that you were personally able to provide to the leadership team?

“I have no idea beyond that I tried to bring a producer’s perspective. I don’t think it was any one thing in particular. We had one member of the board who tried to explain that it’s not all about return on investment. I said, ‘It sure is about return on investment! If I can’t make money doing this, I’m not going to do it. Do you do things on which you don’t make any money? Does your company make machines that don’t make any money? No? Well, as a farmer, I’m not

going to do something that doesn’t make money. That’s why we’re doing it.’”

There are a bunch of academics, and then they had a bunch of equipment people there. They’re kind of in their own little world. The equipment guys know their equipment and know how to build a machine to do anything as long as we don’t care about the cost. The scientists are there who can do anything to get a product as long as we don’t care how well it sells and how much it costs to produce. I think that they finally got the point and were able to come up with a thing that would make money for everyone involved, but you had to steer them in that direction once in a while.”

There’s more theory than practicality.

“Well, yes, it was in the beginning.”

Let’s reframe the question, then. How do you think that farmer’s perspective changed the way they approached the project?

“I hope it was effective, and I think it made them more aware of the farmers’ production problems. Most land is rented or leased now-a-days. Very few producers have five-year leases, and you need to grow these grasses for five years. Getting the renter and their landlord to come to a five-year agreement is tough, especially with a fluctuating market. It’s just tough without a worthwhile return on their investment.”

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



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“I think the people on the board were excellent. They really helped the various parts of the study to focus on what the board thought needed to be done. Sometimes, parts of the study would go off to do their own thing. ‘No, we really want you to do this instead to coordinate with everyone else,’ we’d say, so they went off and did that and would come back with excellent data.

The advisory board was a way to bring together all of these different factions in order to work towards a common goal, and that’s a difficult thing to do in any situation. I thought they did an excellent job of that. There were so many parts that had to be studied, everything from health and safety to production, marketing and transportation. They tried to put together a whole package of how to do this, to get everyone working towards a common goal at the same time. That’s always hard with a large group. Having been in a lot of groups, I can tell you it’s very hard. Parts tend to go off on their own unless you really steer them in the right direction.”

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

“We kept it all on track and came up with a plan to make this system work. We came up with answers to all of the possible questions that both the producers and manufacturers will have about this kind of process. I think they did come up with a plan to make the system work, but you need buy-in from corporations and others. We had one board member from ADM who presented to ADM what the board was doing, and ADM figured that they could make money doing it by turning it into chemicals, sugars and whatnot, but they declined to do it for whatever reason. Putting together this whole system and showing that it has the potential to make money at realistic price-points is probably the most important thing that the board did.”

What do you hope will come out of CenUSA?

“I would hope that people will start doing what we were talking about sooner rather than later. That’s my big hope. There are all kinds of problems preventing that from happening though. You can get into politics, ‘big oil,’ big oil subsidies and all kinds of things. They’re not going to do it until gas is \$5. Then all of a sudden they’re going to wonder where else we can get gas, but as long as we continue to subsidize oil and gas production as a nation, it’s not going to happen.

If consumers had to pay the real cost of oil and gas, it would happen tomorrow. I’ve seen studies saying that if we paid the real cost, we’d be looking at what Europe is paying or higher, but because we subsidize this whole system as a nation, having everything from warships in the Persian Gulf to tax credits for fracking, it isn’t going to happen.”

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

“I’m retired, but if someone came up to me and said that they could mow my grassland in return for a certain amount of dollars-per-ton, I’d probably sell. I’d sell them grass, but I’m retired, so I’m probably not going to do much personally.”

Would you take another advisory role, and if so, how would your experience on the CenUSA advisory board change your approach?

“I would certainly take another role on another advisory board for a project. I thought it was a great experience. When I go to a thing like this, I like to sit in the front row and ask questions. Sometimes that makes people nervous, but I like to ask questions, so I wouldn’t change that. I suppose I maybe wouldn’t be so blunt. I am a little blunt sometimes. I don’t know how much I would change. It was certainly a great experience, and I thought they had a great idea there. Trying to make it happen, however, is another matter.”



Read our White Paper

https://cenusa.iastate.edu/files/cenusa_2019_075.pdf

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

CenUSA Bioenergy is supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant No. 2011-68005-30411 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture