



# 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. Learn more about CenUSA at [www.cenusa.iastate.edu](http://www.cenusa.iastate.edu)

In May 2019, **Sorrel Brown**<sup>1</sup>, retired Iowa State University Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Program Evaluator, spoke about her work and experience as a CenUSA co-project director focused on Extension and Outreach with CenUSA Communications Intern Tyler Worsham, to whom she explained how the Extension and Outreach Objective sought to educate the public on the efforts and accomplishments of the project.<sup>2</sup>

### **How did you initially get involved with CenUSA?**

"I knew some of the people who were instrumental in getting the grant, and one of the grant requirements was to have solid evaluation data. I am a program evaluator for Extension agriculture and natural resources, so because they knew that, they came to me and asked me if I would be a part of the CenUSA team."



Sorrel Brown, front and center with her Extension colleagues

### **What made you an ideal candidate for your position as a co-project leader with CenUSA?**

"Because I had been involved in other grants before, I was familiar with Extension and its goals and purpose. I was also a program evaluator for agriculture and natural resources, so it was a natural fit. "

### **What were some of these other projects?**

"I'd have to strain my memory to recall some specifics, but they (different projects) would be about

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<sup>1</sup> Learn more about Sorrel Brown in "Sorrel Brown: Women in Agriculture – Taking the Knife and Living the Dream" <https://blades-newsletter.blogspot.com/2016/04/sorrel-brown-women-in-agriculture.html>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

different approaches to evaluating different Extension-type activities. They could have been in sustainable agriculture, crop production, or effective communications with public audiences. These were the kind of things I've done in my involvement with other groups and teams."

**In what ways did the project broaden your professional knowledge and skill set?**

"Well, it [CenUSA] was quite large. There were about six or seven land-grant universities involved in it, so I didn't know a lot of the personnel involved. That (working with new personnel, new universities and with new fields of research) certainly broadened my exposure to other researchers and other Extension specialists in other land-grant universities."

**To what new ideas and disciplines were you exposed as a part of your work with CenUSA?**

"When you look at all of the fields that CenUSA covered, they varied considerably in areas in which I had very little expertise. There's marketing distribution, commercialization, feedstock development, sustainable feedstock production systems. A lot of that was out of my purview in terms of technical background. I'm an agronomist by technical profession, so I was much more tuned-in to crop production as opposed to livestock."

**How many people participated in Outreach and Extension for this project?**

"We worked with individuals from each of the land-grant universities who were responsible for providing information, knowledge and research results to the public, but it would have covered many of these different types of teams that were on CenUSA. That would have been the scope of Extension working with those people and audiences."

**Did you and your team encounter any obstacles in your Extension work?**

"Yes, because of the different nature of the evaluations that we had to do, we ran into situations in which much of the education and distribution of research results was done on field days when people gathered at the field plots. That's not a very controlled environment in terms of applying a standard survey instrument the way you would in an inside environment. We had to devise methods and approaches that would still help us gather Extension data so we could evaluate what these audiences attending the field plots had learned, whether or not they applied any of what they learned, how they felt about it and whether or not they felt like there were possibilities for future applications in their own operations. It was a very fluid situation from which we had to gather data. It was not a very controlled environment."

**What were some of those methods that you used?**

"We devised introductions for when the person who was providing the training would alert the audience to what we were going to try to capture in terms of their knowledge. They [the audience] were prepared and were made aware of us coming back with questions that would get at their response to the field trial and the tour they experienced. That would be one way. I set up different evaluation protocols that depended on the nature of the education or the Extension event. For example, we did things at the Iowa State Fair. Well, that's a very difficult environment to get evaluation responses, so we had to come up with some very simple, quick and straightforward ways to gather information."



**"I'm sure that some of the things that we developed can be tweaked for future experiences that may deviate from what we have done while still using many of the protocols that we made."**

**What were some noteworthy successes that you and your team achieved in your work with CenUSA?**

“We were able to get some significant data from evaluating some of these audiences that were not quite conventional in the way that we tested them. We worked together within the Extension team to devise different ways to capture the audience’s responses and the degree of knowledge that they gained from the various tours and educational experiences that they had. I came up with a set of questions for an unstructured group interview to get feedback on their thoughts on things like biochar, one of the products that CenUSA was exploring. That’s basically what we did. We learned how to approach the various audiences in the unconventional places in which we found them.”

**What were your primary means of sharing the knowledge developed by the CenUSA project?**

“I wrote one-page fact sheets that were very straightforward and did not use much scientific jargon. Having been in Extension for 35 years, I was certainly experienced in addressing non-scientific lay audiences in the kind of language that would be clear to them and would help them understand the implications of whatever results that the research teams were finding that could apply to the general public.”

**What is most likely to convince producers to apply and adapt to new skills and information from a project like CenUSA?**

“The audiences that came to view our research results in the field plots probably had different reasons for why they were there. Obviously, some of them were probably looking at profitability. Others are concerned with the sustainability of ag practices and the sustainability of environmental conditions, so that’s the kind of diverse backgrounds of the people who came, and obviously had different reasons for why they came to learn about what was being done. Others probably just came out of curiosity about what we were doing and what we were finding out. All of those different reasons apply to the audiences with whom we interacted.”

**Is there anything you and your team learned as a part of your outreach efforts that would change how outreach is done in the future?**

“Since I was at the point of retirement by the end of the CenUSA grant period, I wasn’t really thinking in terms of using it myself, but I wrote a lot of fact sheets about how I went about developing the evaluation tools that we used and posted them in the web space that ISU (Iowa State University) used so that they would be available. I believe that they were posted in the CenUSA library as well. That information is still available to people who know to look there and would like to see some of the evaluation tools, protocols, and results that we came up with during the term of CenUSA.



Check out our Extension Videos at <https://www.youtube.com/user/CenusaBioenergy>

**How do you hope that outreach could be changed by others in the future?**

“I think that we effectively showed that even though you have unconventional environments for providing research data and results that there are ways that we can tap into audience feedback so that you can gather significant evaluation data on whether or not those audiences learned and planned to use something or planned to pass that information on to their friends and fellow farmers. I think that one of the unintended consequences of what we developed was ways to show the unconventional environments that could be tested.”

**Are there new tools, programs or resources that could be developed to help those who need them? Is there anything that could be done that hasn't been done before?**

“I'm sure there are. We haven't thought of everything, and I'm sure that some of the things that we developed can be tweaked for future experiences that may deviate from what we have done while still using many of the protocols that we made. I can't specifically say since I've not been involved in it for three years since (my participation) ended.”

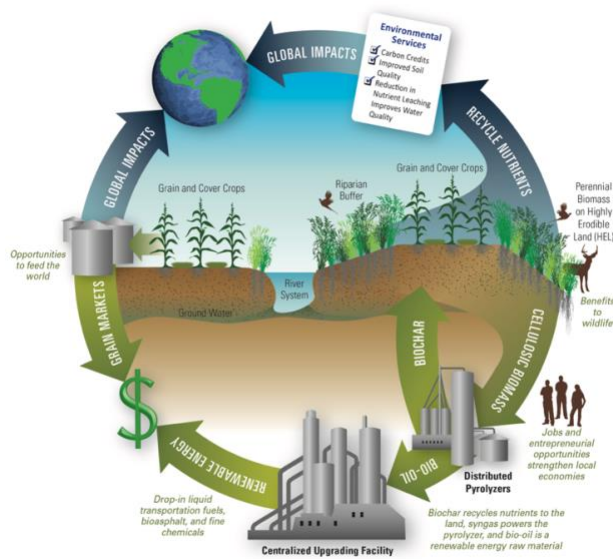
**What is the most noteworthy or most interesting facet of your work with CenUSA that you would like the interested members of the general public to know and understand about your work?**

“Probably the most important aspect is that there are ways of evaluating the application of research data in a way that is practical for a farmer to use. We showed that some of what the researchers found through their fieldwork could be translated into something a farmer could do for themselves.

**Sorrel Brown CenUSA Bioenergy Work Product**

- ✓ Biofuels Harvest Survey Results 2014 – Purdue Univ. **Sorrel Brown** & Guang Han, Iowa State Univ. (2014). 2014 Purdue Univ. Educational Field Day. [https://cenusa.iastate.edu/files/cb88-rep\\_yr\\_4\\_biofuels\\_harvest\\_survey\\_report\\_-\\_in\\_2014.pdf](https://cenusa.iastate.edu/files/cb88-rep_yr_4_biofuels_harvest_survey_report_-_in_2014.pdf)
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- ✓ Value of Introduction for Outreach Surveys. **Sorrel Brown**, Iowa State Univ. Extension. 2012. [https://www.cenusa.iastate.edu/files/cb97-instruct\\_yr\\_2\\_value\\_of\\_intros\\_for\\_outreach\\_surveys.pdf](https://www.cenusa.iastate.edu/files/cb97-instruct_yr_2_value_of_intros_for_outreach_surveys.pdf)
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### CenUSA Bioenergy Vision

Learn more about CenUSA at [www.cenusa.iastate.edu](http://www.cenusa.iastate.edu)

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