Dewitt Outlines Changes in Ag Over the First 20 Years of SARE

In reviewing the past 20 years of sustainable agriculture, Jerry Dewitt sees influences that have changed the way the nation and its producers view agriculture.

Dewitt, director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Ames, Iowa, moderated the Western SARE Southwest Subregional Conference in Albuquerque June 10 and 11. In a keynote presentation to 100 conference attendees, Dewitt listed the changes he’s perceived:
1. We have added to our vocabulary, with words and phrases like free range, management intensive grazing, composting, carbon footprint, community supported agriculture, locavore, food miles and high tunnels.

2. We have invested in new sustainable agriculture centers, more than a dozen, including at land-grant universities in Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, Washington, Utah and Wyoming.

3. We have added to the curricula at land-grant universities.

4. We have brought new voices to the table, voices with a vote, and we’re looked on as a model in that arena.

5. We have embraced organic agriculture.

6. We have acknowledged the value of on-farm research, now being conducted at nearly every land-grant university.

7. We have learned to recognize the need for “community” in our mission. “What we do on our farms and ranches impacts our communities.”

8. We have instilled a sustainable agriculture presence at our land grants, in large measure through state sustainable agriculture professional development program coordinators. However, Dewitt said more work is needed. For example, the Organic Farming Research Foundation reports that only 0.13% of land grant research acres are in organic. “We need to do better than that,” he said.

9. We’ve learned that farmers and ranchers are great teachers, and we’ve learned that farmers and ranchers need to help plan, deliver and evaluate our research.

10. We’ve started putting “culture” back in agriculture.

Speaking to the purpose of the Western SARE Southwest Subregional Conference, Dewitt told conference participants, “You have a voice and you have a vote, and with your help we’re going to make the Western region better than it already is.”

He cited several issues on the horizon, including creative marketing, local food systems, family farm profitability, value-added agriculture, entrepreneurship and multifunctional
agriculture. He added that the top two forces facing agriculture are on-farm energy use and the relationship between food and health.

Dewitt said that SARE is not pork; SARE is a partnership, one that is critical for the nation’s producers.

“If we lose our farmers and ranchers, we won’t starve, but we will have a different society,” he said.