

Sound Science, Smart Solutions: FAS Support Makes a Difference

By Andrew Rude

Egypt buys a lot of U.S. wheat—on average, 4 million metric tons a year, making it our biggest wheat customer. So when Egyptian officials raised phytosanitary questions, a Washington, D.C., trade association wasted no time in giving answers—and assurance—thanks in part to a special fund within the Emerging Markets Program run by the Foreign Agricultural Service.

U.S. Wheat Associates, an industry association, brought eight quality control experts from Egypt to show them how the U.S. wheat industry carefully screens its product for shipping overseas. They did this with money from the Technical Issues Resolution Fund, otherwise known as TIRF.

“TIRF was created under the Emerging Markets Program (EMP) as a special funding source for resolving trade concerns related to scientific issues such as plant or animal health,” said Doug Freeman who heads the program. “It is one of the tools we offer through EMP to expand U.S. agricultural exports.”

TIRF allows U.S. exporters to respond quickly to foreign buyers’ concerns. Sometimes a lot of ground work, based on scientific understanding and mutually agreed-upon protocols, needs to be in place before markets open. Other times an immediate, science-based trade concern threatens the flow of existing trade and needs to be resolved at once.

Funding from the TIRF program is flexible enough to serve either purpose. Quick turn-around time for applications



allows for lightning-fast interventions. Opportunities for re-application make it possible to build a scientific foundation for long-term market development.

Using TIRF funds, U.S. Wheat Associates arranged for seminars in Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Mo., and Houston, Tex.

This tour enabled U.S. wheat industry experts to talk face-to-face with Egyptian grain purchasers and port officials. These officials also had a chance to ask questions and have their phytosanitary issues thoroughly addressed.

Delegation members also met with FAS

How TIRF Opens Doors

TIRF provides money to trade associations, governments and industries so they may overcome trade barriers in emerging markets. The funding mainly supports technical assistance and training.

TIRF funds can be used to address:

- Time-sensitive food safety issues that require quick solutions, such as support for the Egyptian delegation of wheat inspectors.
- Strategic areas of longer term interest, such as the biotechnology workshop for emerging markets in Eastern Europe.

Activities are limited to emerging market countries—those with more than 1 million people, with a per capita income of less than \$9,360. These countries must also represent a viable market for U.S. agricultural products.

Proposals may also target multi-country regional groups such as the countries of the Caribbean Basin.

Proposals are evaluated according to their potential for promoting trade in priority emerging markets, addressing a key trade constraint or supporting USDA field offices overseas.

officials as well as researchers with two other USDA agencies, the Grain Inspection, Packers & Stockyards Administration and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

It was time well-spent; differences over grain standards were resolved and shipments began to flow freely again.

“Our hope for this team was to build confidence in the U.S. system of certification for quality,” said Dick Prior, U.S. Wheat Associates vice president for the Middle East. “It shows that different inspection groups really can work together.”

In order to build on the progress made from this visit, U.S. Wheat Associates plans to include FAS in its future workshops and training programs.

This success was one of many for TIRF. Since 1996, when the fund was established, over 60 technical assistance, projects, training efforts and workshops have received support.

Fostering Two-Way Trade in China

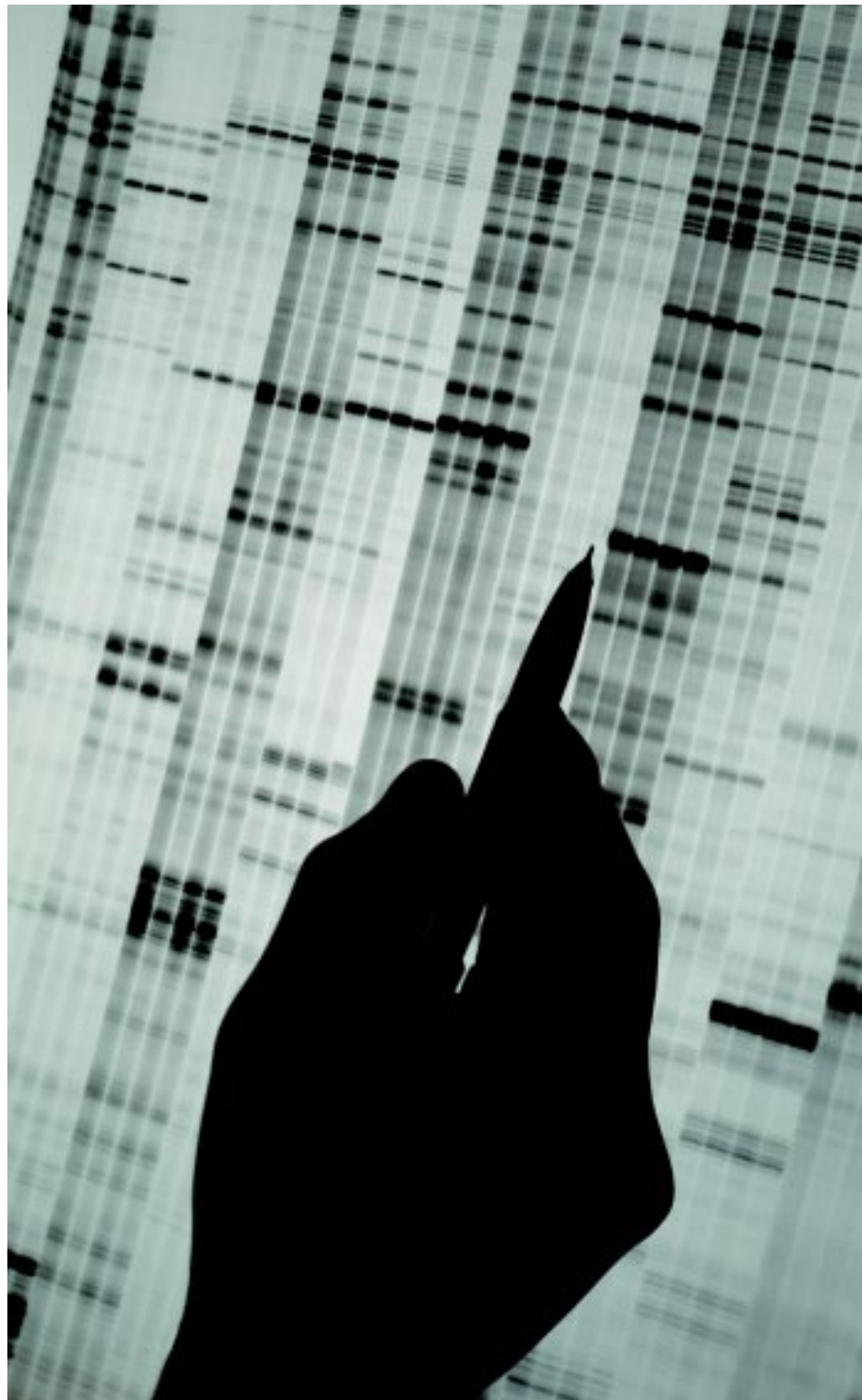
U.S. corn growers may someday see better crops thanks to the TIRF program. They may also enhance their seed trade with China.

Both China and the United States would like to trade in corn seed as breeding stock. By exchanging “parent plants” from overseas and crossing them with native varieties, both nations would gain a better corn crop.

U.S. corn plants stand to benefit from increased genetic diversity. Too much similarity in genetic composition leaves the U.S. corn crop vulnerable to disease. Subtle differences in varieties make it harder for pests and diseases to take hold.

China, meanwhile, would benefit from crossing high-yielding U.S. lines with its current breeding stock.

There are two phytosanitary impedi-



ments to such an arrangement. China's corn crop may contain downy mildew fungus species that may not be found in the United States. Conversely, some of the U.S. crop has suffered outbreaks of Stewart's wilt, a disease that, it is claimed, does not occur in China. Neither country wishes to infect the other—such a mishap would reduce yields and profitability all around. Scientists in China and the United States are trying to develop protocols that would allow trade in plant lines without an exchange of disease.

In pursuit of this goal, the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA) has used TIRF money to organize a cooperative industry and government pest risk analysis.

Mark Condon, vice president of marketing with ASTA, encouraged the U.S. seed industry to apply for TIRF funding.

“While the actual direct exchange of seed lines is far off, we hope that ASTA's work—and the work of the U.S. and Chinese scientists and government officials involved—will benefit U.S. seed producers in the future,” said Condon.

A Forum for the Future Through TIRF

Paul Spencer, agricultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria, used TIRF to support a forum to address public concerns about biotechnology in Eastern Europe and outline what the U.S. government does to ensure safety and quality of products of biotechnology.

Sponsors of the forum, attended by over 100 scientists, regulators, journalists and representatives of consumer groups, included the American Soybean Association and the Slovak Ministry of Agriculture.

Scientists and regulators explained the status of new variety approvals for eight countries in the region. Speakers came from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic,



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Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the European Union and the United States.

“We saw this as an opportunity to educate people about biotechnology and the U.S. regulatory system,” said Spencer. “This forum allowed us to demonstrate why we are confident of our regulatory process.”

Spencer added that the idea for the forum came from worldwide discourse about the potential of biotechnology—and the need to address questions not only among farmers, but also among end-users.

“Crop science has come a long way in the last decade, but to many consumers, the technology is still very new. We see open discussions as key to building understand-

ing and confidence among everyone involved in this issue,” he said. “This was my opportunity to contribute to that understanding.” ■

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