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Trends and Opportunities in Agriculture An Executive Interview with Lowell Catlett ¹

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Introduction

Agriculture will change more in the next decade than it did in the last century. Lowell Catlett is a futurist sharing his knowledge and insight on the new trends and technologies shaping the future of agriculture and how those working in this industry can take advantage of new opportunities. Dr. Catlett is a Regent's Professor at New Mexico State University and Dean of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics.

This podcast can be seen with Realplayer on IAMA's website at:
http://www.ifama.org/dispatch.asp?page=executive_interviews_2008

¹ Lowell Catlett has authored numerous books and articles and won the Westhafer Award, NMSU's highest award given to a professor. He works nationally and internationally with corporations and organizations doing futuristic planning on the impact of technology on careers, lifestyles and the economy. Catlett also works with the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Labor, Interior, Defense, Education, Energy and the World Bank. He has presented to more than 75 universities including Harvard, MIT, and Cornell. Dr. Catlett can be contacted at: agdean@nmsu.edu.

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In the changing world of agriculture, creativity and innovation are becoming very important. Lowell Catlett who is dean of agriculture at New Mexico State University has gained a reputation of sort for getting our thinking going. Let's talk about innovation. Is it important these days?

Catlett: Well, I think it's more critical now, than at any time in agriculture and natural resources history. We've got lots of opportunities and a lot of problems—however you want to frame them. The only way they're going to be solved is by people who will, take a fresh look and be creative. We've had people in the past doing wonderful things in the field of agriculture. But, we've got some really interesting opportunities now where agriculture is not just food anymore. It's as you know, in Nebraska and other places, becoming a vital energy component, and as we start looking at other potential things, such as pharmacology. We're going to need some creativity to get those jobs done.

We can think about some of the road blocks in the past. Maybe lack of communication and these sort of things, but maybe it's better to talk about opportunities. There are opportunities in terms of both information and in terms of things we can do.

Catlett: One of things that I try to get people to understand is this generation coming on now, the young people, that I call iPodders, they grew up in a world where they've had total food security. The worst thing that's happened to them is not getting tomatoes for a week, or they had to quit eating fresh spinach. You know, whereas our parents went through the great depression, they had to scramble to make sure there was enough food on the table. And, I'm not saying this is bad, they just have a totally different concept of food. So, we have to ramp up to an idea of what we thought was maybe silly—to know from birth to the slaughter house where a cow was. We think that's silly, but to the generation that grew up basically saying, “well, I don't want a one-one-billionth of a chance of getting mad cow disease, so I want to know exactly where that calf was born.” And so it's one of those things that we've got to now ramp up our understanding of what they demand and want, and that takes a lot of creativity to figure it out.

So, there's demand, but also an opportunity here. Consumers have this opportunity to ask for more information, but there's an opportunity from the point of view of the seller to respond to that.

Catlett: Oh, absolutely. If you want to certify your animals so that they are e-coli free or if you want to make sure they are certified to the source—there's a market for them. There's a market now that's doubled in the last decade for organic. Well, you know, our parents grew up with organic. That's why they told us to cook chicken and wash the vegetables. They grew up in an organic world and we moved away from it, and now there's a certain class of people that want it. And hey, if you

can provide that and make money off of them, more power to you. It's a totally changing dynamic. We now have 50 million square feet of office space in the United States now, that's considered to be green, green roofs. So, we've got farmers that are now taking care of green roofs. Downtown Chicago led the nation last year—2.5 millions square feet of downtown skyscrapers in Chicago with green roofs. It's sod. It's bedding plants. I keep trying to tell the next generation of farmers “you're going to be farming the top of the John Hancock Tower”. And it's going to be kind of high up. Our parents would have said, “What are you talking about?” But here's a great opportunity, green roofs, green walls, things that weren't even on the horizon five years ago, are providing great opportunities.

So, how does a producer approach this? What am I doing and where are the opportunities around this? How do you approach it and find those creative ideas to exploit?

Catlett: Well, part of it has always been, you know, as Thomas Jefferson told us, reading imparts knowledge but travel imparts wisdom. And part of it is to always be receptive to an opportunity. And that's one of the things that we find, that people lose their creativity because they go “oh, we've tried that.” Okay, or they don't go to enough events, or they're not around enough people. They're not around a stimulating enough environment. And when you don't use your brain, it atrophies. But what we do know from the new neuro-genesis is that the brain, what we were told early on in human medicine was that the brain, did not reproduce itself. But we now know that that's not true. About every fourteen days, your brain, just like your bones and other parts of your body, is a totally new one. So, we've got to get out of the mindset that we don't have new brain cells. How do we do it? We've just got to keep them stimulated. So, how do you do it? They understand the numbers. It takes about 150 ideas. People sitting around brainstorming, “I think saw dust would be a good energy source.” Ok, of 150 new ideas...only about 10 are worth exploring. Only one will have any substance or value. So, it takes a lot of bouncing around and talking to people and creative discussions. And most of us, and it's not just farmers, most of us don't live in an environment that keeps us constantly stimulated. And my point is, if you will read, travel and share with people, throwing ideas out, your creative goes up. You've got a better chance of finding new markets.

So, finding ways to at least discuss those 150 ideas every day, every week, whatever the time period is. At least, interacting with people, or maybe on the internet... some way to get those 150 ideas at least on the table.

Catlett: What's interesting, the older you get, the more you find out that these problems existed a long time ago. Many of the farmer organizations got their start after the Civil War; people would travel and look at the very poverty-stricken, very socially-closed environments in rural America. They said, you know, “The only way

we can help these people is to open up a larger social network in order to know the opportunities.” The cooperative extension service was founded on that concept. But most of the farmer organizations trace their roots back to trying to bring farmers out of a very isolated environment into a larger social environment so they could trade seed and learn a new practice, and get those ideas stimulated. It’s not a new concept.

But yet, we’ve maybe withdrawn from that over the recent years...The neighbor is a competitor. But maybe you go beyond the neighbor and talk to someone else in the next county or the next state.

Catlett: We used to call it “coffee shop talk”. But surprisingly, if it’s in the coffee shop or talking with your neighbors where you get some new ideas, then so be it. And the young generation—the new young generation, carries their cell phones with them. They’ve notched it up and are constantly texting their friends. So this young generation is the one coming up with a lot of new ideas because they are socially connected now in a way that you and I have never been. My wife will text me and I just pick up the phone and call her, and she goes “Why didn’t you text me?” I go, “It’s easier for me to call you.” But this generation, they love to text, so they have a social network almost 24 hours a day. They have great ideas.

So the key here is keep that brain functioning and think about ideas and find that one gem there.

Catlett: That’s exactly right. Don’t give up.