

Research Farm Looks To Future

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BERESFORD — Brad Rops and Peter Sexton welcome visitors to their farm. In fact, they load up their guests on flatbeds and give tours of the fields.

Offering that form of hospitality might seem a little different. Then again, the farm near Beresford stands apart from its neighbors.

The Southeast South Dakota Research Farm acts as a living laboratory, but you won't find any test tubes, beakers or Bunsen burners. The South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service operates the farm, which provides valuable research for both crops and livestock.

The farm offers summer and fall demonstrations, and this summer's Southeast Research Farm Field Day drew twice as many participants as normal, said Rops, the research center's operations manager.

"We had a real good turnout this summer. We have seen crowds in past years drop to around 50 or 60, and this year we had around 100 people," he said. "Some of this year's popularity was the drought. People were curious, and they came from a distance to see how the crops were looking in another neighborhood."

While located near Beresford, the research farm's impact is felt across southeastern South Dakota, Rops said. The service area includes Minnehaha, Lincoln, Turner, Clay, Union, Hutchinson, Yankton, Bon Homme, Douglas, and Charles Mix counties.

"Our service area goes from the Iowa border (on the east) over to the Missouri River (on the west)," he said. "For these demonstration days, it's not uncommon to get some people from Nebraska and Iowa, and we get them from as far west as the Mitchell area. We actually pull them in from a distance."

MAKING THE CUT

But the demonstration days — or the farm itself — could have become nothing more than a memory.

Last year, South Dakota State University (SDSU) made a number of budget cuts, including at its agricultural research centers.

The Beresford center was spared the chopping block, but SDSU closed its oldest experiment station at Highmore and its northeast station at Miller, Rops said. SDSU also closed its soil lab and biochemistry lab.

"It was very dramatic," he added.

The budget cuts, which also affected the Extension service, were a fiscal necessity because of the lack of funding, said Barry Dunn, SDSU Extension director and dean of the College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences. However, Dunn takes the increased attendance at the Beresford field day as more than a one-time event.

"People want us to succeed, and they were showing it with their support and attendance (at the Beresford demonstration day)," he said. "They want us to do well with Extension and the experiment stations. There is something about the character and support that we receive for Extension."

While budget cuts included the research farms, SDSU remains committed to its mission, Dunn said.

"I think, over time, it is my hope and dream that there are more and more innovations (that come from the farms)," he said. "These experiment stations need to be the heartbeat of agriculture."

The Beresford station has served the region and state for nearly six decades, according to its website.

Around 1955, a group of progressive farmers began efforts to create an association concerned with agricultural research in southeast South Dakota. On May 3, 1956, a non-profit organization, the Southeast Experiment Farm Corporation, was formed. The purpose of the corporation was to acquire and disseminate information concerning crop and livestock production.

The business affairs of the corporation are handled by a very active Board of Directors. Members of the board are elected for a two-year term from each participating county.

An annual meeting is held each year to allow members to review the activities of the corporation. The meeting also hears reports on progress of research projects and make suggestions on research that may need to be added to solve upcoming problems.

Because the corporation is non-profit, all funds generated by the corporation are used to advance research through improvement of buildings and facilities located at the station.

The current six full-time employees include Rops as operations manager; Sexton as farm supervisor, who divides his week between the farm and SDSU in Brookings; the secretary/statistical person; two ag technicians who do a large amount of field work; and a research assistant who works with livestock.



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

Visitors receive a welcoming sign upon entering the Southeast South Dakota Research Farm near Beresford. South Dakota State University (SDSU) of Brookings operates the experiment farm, which conducts research with both crops and livestock. SDSU spared the southeast research center from last year's budgetary axe, forced by funding shortfalls. This year, the farm has conducted valuable research related to the historic drought and is also working with livestock projects.

DROUGHT CONDITIONS

This year's drought provided a number of research opportunities in dealing with stressed crops and livestock, Rops said.

The U.S. Drought Monitor recently downgraded southeast South Dakota, along with northeast Nebraska, to D4 — exceptional drought, the most extreme situation.

"As far as the drought, nobody likes to see disastrous weather events. But we have a lot of unique things thrown in (the operation) this year," he said. "Hopefully, we can get some answers and learn along with the producers for the next time this (drought) rolls around. For now, we are gaining insight and knowledge."

Rops commended the staff for its work in dealing with a historic drought situation. "Our staff did a good job with the different research programs," he said.

The research apparently drew the attention of area producers, spurring the high interest in this summer's field demonstration, Rops said. "We have the plants that pertain to what people are facing," he said.

The Southeast Research Center staff is also working with different rotations, as well as tillage and no tillage, said Sexton, the farm supervisor. The staff is also working on finding herbicides and other solutions as weeds become resistant to current methods.

The extreme conditions will put the experiment crops to the test in the current trials, Sexton said.

"The drought will separate the men from the boys," he said.

This summer's dryness provides a dramatically sharp contrast from 2011, Rops said.

"Last year, we had an incredibly wet spring," he said. "The corn acres didn't get in, but we adapted to that. We got some good data there for prevented acres."

SPREADING THE WORK

Not all of the research center's work takes place at the Beresford site, Sexton said. Work also takes place at other sites around the service area for a variety of reasons, he said.

"We are localizing the research. We have farm research near Lesterville and Wagner, and a little bit north of Parkston," he said.

"It's beneficial to have research for our constituents in the western part of the service area, to have these plots. We are going to see so much more of that in the future."

While crops command much of the attention at the demonstration days, the southeast research center also conducts extensive work with livestock, Rops said.

"We have the beef feedlot, and we also have a couple of swine facilities," he said.

In fact, SDSU Extension swine specialist Bob Thaler spoke during the summer field day. He offered money-saving tips to hog producers. His presentation addressed lowering the temperatures in pig nurseries at night and the fine grinding of feed as two options.

Other research topics addressed at the field day included:

- Evaluation of herbicides for weed control in corn and soybeans, presented by Mike Moehnig, SDSU Extension Weed Specialist;

- Minimizing N Losses From Urea Application, presented by Ron Gelderman, SDSU Extension, Soil Fertility Specialist;

- Soybean Row Spacing and Plant Population, presented by Bob Hall, SDSU Extension;

- Tile Drainage Update presented by Chris Hay, SDSU Agriculture & Biosystems Engineering.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Rops noted much has changed in the two decades that he has worked at the southeast research center.

"I started here in 1993, which is relatively modern compared to when we started (talking about) the farm itself in 1955," he said. "I

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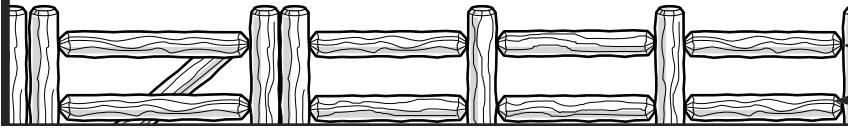
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