The sixty-second NECC Annual Meeting and Leaders Forum was held at the Doubletree Hotel in Syracuse, N.Y. on Tuesday March 29 and Wednesday March 30. The meeting was held in conjunction with the CoBank customer meeting and was co-sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University. Over 180 cooperative leaders attended.

Dr. Brian Wansink kicked off the Forum on Tuesday morning addressing the topic of “Marketing Nutrition.” Wansink, the John Dyson Professor of Consumer Behavior at Cornell University, directs the Cornell Food and Brand Laboratory. He is author of over 100 academic articles and books, including the best-selling Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think (2006) along with Marketing Nutrition (2005), Asking Questions (2007-2009 to accept a Presidential appointment as Executive Director of USDA’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, he presented the rationale for branding and reviewed various strategies for successful branding. Key success factors include:

- Creation of value that translates into a price premium
- Value that is communicated accurately and consistently to consumers
- Value should be endorsed by a formal infrastructure that guarantees consistency

He discussed his leave-of-absence from Cornell during 2007-2009 to accept a Presidential appointment as Executive Director of USDA’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, the Federal agency in charge of developing the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and promoting the Food Guide Pyramid (MyPyramid.gov)

Thomas Carter discussed “Opportunities for U.S. Cooperatives in Emerging Markets.” Carter, coordinator of USAID’s Cooperative Development Program which is a grant activity managed by the Agency’s Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation in the Office of Development Partners. He emphasized that the views he presented were his own and did not reflect the official policy of the USAID.

He began with a review of the lessons learned from the “Commission on Country Life” that was formed under the Theodore Roosevelt administration. The Commission chaired by Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University emphasized advantages of cooperative organizations in improving the rural economy and well-being of rural communities.

He suggested that given the economic growth and increased prosperity in emerging market countries, that U.S. based cooperatives should be thinking about global business opportunities in these developing economies. He encouraged U.S. cooperatives to give more thought to how they might become more involved in economic development such as joint ventures, sourcing or selling goods and services or forming alliances. He offered the resources of USAID for possible assistance in these efforts targeting emerging market countries.

Following lunch on Tuesday, Bob Engel, President and CEO of CoBank offered remarks on the bank’s performance as well as on the proposed merger with U.S. AgBank. CoBank recruited several nationally recognized speakers to address the group during the rest of the afternoon and evening. Carlos Gutierrez, former CEO Kellogg Company and Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce under the Bush administration gave a presentation on “Driving America’s Business Agenda.” He encouraged U.S. firms to give more thought to exporting products and services. There are both long distance and closer to home opportunities such as doing more business with Canada or Mexico. He commented on the challenges of addressing immigration reform as it is very difficult to achieve bi-partisan agreement on this controversial subject.

Marc Russell, former chief economist for CNBC, offered an “Economic Update.” She was one of the most popular speakers from last year. She takes complex economic issues, often dull in the button-down business press, and makes them relevant to people’s lives, families and careers.

She presented a useful analogy on how interest rates are set and change. Her forecast is for rising U.S. interest rates as the...
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The dinner speaker was Paul Stajduhar, Ocean Spray’s Vice President of Corporate Strategy and Business Development explaining how Ocean Spray is “Aligning Cooperative Demand and Supply Strategies.” At Ocean Spray, he helped to develop a long-range plan that increased demand for products as well as better managed raw product supply. He discussed the two basic operational sides of Ocean Spray – as a consumer products company developing demand and supply strategies and as a farmer cooperative developing supply strategies. A primary challenge is to balance both the demand and supply dimensions of the cooperative.

There are four general areas that are involved in enhancing demand: innovation, brand development, international expansion, and increased scale via alliances. He described the strategies adopted in each of these general areas. He reviewed the supply strategy design principles that included: creating a branded product pool for member cranberries (A-pool), a commodity pool (B-pool) for non-patronage cranberry concentrate, and a land reserve as insurance if needed for additional cranberry supply. Some of the keys to success are:
- Start with a sound, growth-oriented business plan
- Incorporate Board direction regarding a balance between returns and utilization
- Use a supply strategy to align grower value with brand growth

Dr. Gregory McKee reviewed “Innovative Online Education About Cooperatives.” As an assistant professor and director of the Freeman Burdick Center for Cooperatives at North Dakota State University, his teaching and research interests address inter-firm relationships in food and agricultural economics. He teaches courses in cooperative business management and in agribusiness industrial strategy. He is a member of the leadership team for the Community of Practice on Cooperatives for eXtension (see www.extension.org/cooperatives).

He presented a description of his use of online technology and resources to teach undergraduate courses across the geography of North Dakota. He also has developed online content for the eXtension Website on cooperatives.

The forum wrapped up with round table discussions for directors and managers. These sessions have become very popular and allow managers across the Northeast to discuss current issues and share strategies. For more information on the meeting and presentations by several speakers visit the following Website: http://cooperatives.dyson.cornell.edu/partners.htm

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