

No need to continue funding food research, says federal agency

NOT STRATEGIC ▶ Food is not one of the new target areas for NSERC funding through 2015

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Agricultural scientists and farm groups are expressing dismay at a decision by a federal research agency to stop funding food research.

The decision by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) sends a negative message, both at home and abroad, that Canada is not interested in research which a hungry world urgently needs, says a coalition of researchers.

NSERC in January named new "strategic target areas" for its 2011 to 2015 funding. Only where agricultural research dovetails with manufacturing, environmental science and technology, information and communications technology, and natural resources and energy will projects be eligible for funding.

"There is a sense of calm about food," says John Kennelly, dean of the faculty of agricultural, life and environmental sciences at the University of Alberta. The grocery stores are full, so food is taken for granted, he says.

Kennelly calls the federal government's decision to stop funding research into novel food and functional foods or bio-products "an additional stake in the coffin" of essential efforts to improve agricultural productivity.

Kennelly ticks off four factors that add up to the very real possibility of a global food shortage—a rapidly expanding pop-

ulation, threats to successful agricultural practices from climate change, environmental damage in developing countries from a sharp increase in food production, and a growing concern about food quality and safety.

Kennelly says NSERC is buying into the generally held view that productivity has been taken care of and we don't have to worry about it anymore.

"Food is essential for life, it will always be so and Canada is a major food producer," he says. "We are not creating new land, therefore we have to increase the productivity of existing land. The bottom line is, investing in R&D is essential."

Kennelly is also president of the Canadian Faculties of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, which sent an open letter to newspapers across Canada protesting against the funding changes (see page five). He says, the U of A has been building capacity in agriculture and food research and is among the top faculties in per capita funding of professors. It is home to two of five new recently announced provincially funded research centres.

"But we would be even more productive if we were able to continue to get additional funding from national sources," he says. "If there is a cutback, it will affect our ability to sustain the teams of people we have built over the last 10 years. We won't know the impact on Alberta until we know what funding is given out here, but it is inevitably going to have a significant impact."



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Double whammy

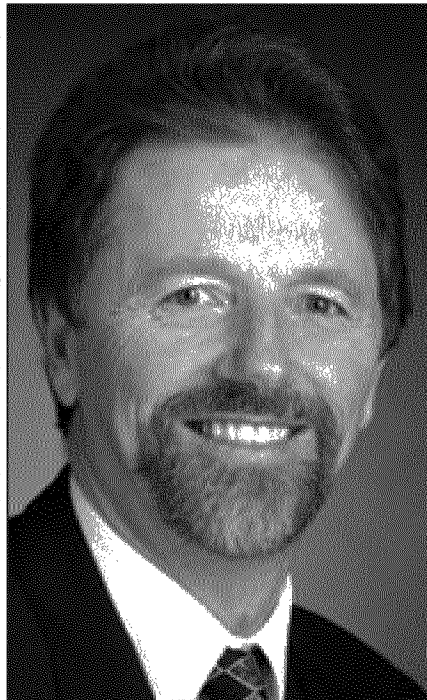
NSERC’s decision doubled the whammy felt on the farm, according to Mike Leslie, CEO of the Alberta Barley Commission. The commission is part of the national Farmers for Investment in Agriculture coalition that wrote to the government’s Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food in November.

Farmers are concerned that scientists are not being hired to train alongside federal researchers soon to retire, Leslie says.

“The current government has made a decision to go to the industry-led research model, where industry is to fund or co-fund the research. Primary agriculture or primary food product development investment by multinationals just won’t happen,” he says.

Leslie cites work at the Lacombe Field Crop Development Centre to breed disease-resistant strains of grain so farmers don’t have to spray their fields with chemicals.

Multinationals sell the spray, he says, so it’s not in their interest to develop disease-resistant crops. “No one will do the primary hardcore research that will lead to innovations.”



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MIKE LESLIE
ALBERTA BARLEY
COMMISSION

