



J.B. KENDRICK, JR.
Vice President —
Agriculture and
Natural Resources

Regenerative agriculture must be profitable

A new term has begun to appear in written reports, meeting agenda, and workshop programs that center on so-called alternative agricultural systems: “regenerative agriculture.” To some, it is a synonym for organic farming. To others, it encompasses the practices employed by small and limited-resource farmers.

Before common usage captures this term to apply only to the use of organic mulches and biological pest control measures, I want to stake an equally legitimate claim to it as a term referring to all agriculture as it should be practiced.

Regenerative agriculture should be the goal and practice for all farming in environments where the natural fertility and structure of the soil have been degraded and contaminants have accumulated. Sustainable agriculture should be the goal and practice for all farming where detrimental effects to fertile soils have not yet occurred. In either case, an additional goal is essential in the long run: profitable agriculture.

The great challenge is to link these goals in a common agricultural system. The fragility of this linkage has been evident throughout the history of agriculture in the United States. The massive soil erosions of the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, the continuing removal of top soil through water erosion in the drainage areas of our great river systems, the dramatic depletion of the Ogallala water table in the Great Plains area, the rise in resistance and tolerance in important agricultural pests following repeated applications of some insecticides, the increased salinity of many soils in the West, are all examples of imperfect linkage between profitable and sustainable agriculture.

I am not suggesting that the imperfection was due to a calculated disregard for the linkage. An incomplete understanding of the system was a more plausible cause. Science progresses by stages, often in very

small increments. What may at first appear to be unrelated facts may ultimately be integrated into a larger body of knowledge when new facts are discovered.

A word about profitability. The profit motive is strong in our society, and for good reason. To survive in U.S. agriculture, one must make a profit. The marketplace ultimately determines whether a particular agricultural product will persist. It makes no sense to produce things that have no market or that cannot get to a market. Likewise, it makes no sense to produce something that fails to return the costs of production to the producer. Since about three percent of our population can produce food and fiber for all 250 million people in the United States, and still have 25 to 30 percent of their total production left over, marketability and profitability loom prominent in the desired linkage.

I welcome the introduction of the term “regenerative agriculture” into discussions of agricultural systems. I reject the notion that it describes only a pure “return-to-nature” agriculture. It cannot stand alone, ignoring profitability and sustainability. Progress in the agricultural sciences gives many reasons for optimism in finding solutions to the regenerative needs of soils and water, and the activities associated with enlightened agricultural practices.

The goal of linking profitability with regenerative and sustainable agriculture is too challenging to indulge in recriminations about shortcomings of the past. Achievement of the goal will be so acceptable that there need not be divided proponents and antagonists described as small, large, or even corporate farmers. A modern agricultural research and extension program in any Land-Grant institution should find no difficulty in setting a goal to achieve profitability for agriculture through regenerative and sustainable farming practices.