

\$1 Million Grant Furthers Efforts to Eliminate Food Crisis in Africa

by Candace Pollock

COLUMBUS, Ohio (April 16, 2009) — Ohio State University is partnering with Virginia Tech to strengthen food security in Africa with a three-year, \$1 million initiative to improve productivity, availability and marketing of key staple commodities and cash crops.

Ohio State's Office of International Programs in Agriculture is sharing a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) African Food Security Initiative grant to study methods to increase yields, reduce crop risks and boost economic development in Uganda, an East African nation. The commodities being targeted include rice, maize, plantains and tomatoes.

"Food insecurity is a lack of food or the income to purchase that food and it's always been the cornerstone of development issues in Africa. Agricultural production has not kept pace with population growth," said Mark Erbaugh, principal investigator and interim director of the Office of International Programs in Agriculture. "Uganda is an agrarian nation with more than 80 percent of its labor force engaged in small-farm agriculture. To get the economy moving, we have to create more income. That not only means growing more food, but increasing productivity for local, regional and international trade, and linking people to markets to remain profitable."

The main objectives of the African Food Security Initiative include increasing the agricultural productivity and availability of key commodities, developing disease diagnostics, alleviating trade bottlenecks, and reducing sanitary risks from a trade standpoint.

Other Ohio State researchers involved in the project include plant pathologist Sally Miller and horticulturist Rich Pratt, both with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Miller's work will also engage with researchers at Virginia Tech whose studies will focus on the West African nations of Mali and Senegal.

Erbaugh said that such university programs continue Ohio State's four decades of institution-building, degree-training and research collaboration with East Africa, helping to sustain vital international agriculture and rural development partnerships.

"University programs, like this one, that strengthen national capacity to generate scientific and technological responses to development constraints are viewed as important," said Erbaugh. "The project has strengthened Ohio State University's presence in this region and its ability to work with national and international entities to address these development constraints."

Erbaugh said that such programs also continue to emphasize the importance of agriculture's ties to economic development.

"Development assistance, in which food security is a part, has always been part of foreign policy, but there was a period of time in the 1990s when agriculture was left off of the agenda. Agriculture has now returned to the forefront of the development agenda in an attempt to solve the food crisis in developing countries," said Erbaugh. "If we are going to make progress in developing countries, you have to remember their agrarian roots. You can't move forward in economic development if you don't increase their food productivity and marketing, and develop ways to sustain that."

The Office of International Programs in Agriculture is located on Ohio State's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences campus. The work conducted by faculty and staff supported by the Office of International Programs in Agriculture aligns with the college's five-year strategic plan in which research supporting global food production and security is considered a high priority.

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