

## Bioenergy will be a big part of Agricenter's future

Jun 7, 2007 9:29 AM, By Elton Robinson  
Farm Press Editorial Staff

John Bradley and Agricenter International seem like a perfect match for each other.



JOHN BRADLEY, Agricenter's new director of research plans on focusing more of the farm's research on bioenergy and precision agriculture.

The agricultural research and education center in Memphis is focusing more of its on-farm research to cutting edge technologies involving bioenergy, crop traits and precision agriculture. And Bradley, the famed no-till pioneer, feels most comfortable going places where few have been.

Of course, Bradley, hired late last year to replace Jamie Jenkins as the facility's director of research, has a regular job at the Agricenter too — to solicit, plant and complete on-farm research trials with southern field crops.

But the biofuel boom "is an opportunity for us to become a leader," Bradley said. "Like at Milan (where Bradley developed the Milan No-Till Field Day), you have to figure out what you do best and focus on that. The people in the past have done a wonderful job here at Agricenter, but we have an opportunity now to carve our future out, where we want to be five to 10 years down the road."

Bradley's goal is to plant potential biofuel crops and evaluate them for agronomic traits and economic feasibility. "How we harvest and transport biofuel feedstocks economically is important, too. Then we'll look at the cost of production versus other crops. Next year and probably as early as this fall, we'll be moving more into the bioenergy field. We're not going to convert Agricenter into bioenergy crops, but we are going to have that as a focus."

Agricultural technology — from biotechnology to precision agriculture — also figures to be a large part of Agricenter's draw for farmers. With prospects for continued consolidation in agriculture's future, Bradley sees fewer farmers working more land "which means labor is going to continue to be a big issue and we have to replace labor with technology."

Bradley will introduce precision agriculture to the farm, using technology such as the Greenseeker (a sensor which can be mounted on a sprayer) to create GPS maps of plant biomass for managing crops. "Rather than only controlling weeds and spraying bugs, we need to look more at plant health issues."

Private industry research has blossomed in recent years at the Agricenter and can provide farmers a rare look at what's new. "A lot of companies don't have research land in the Delta anymore," Bradley said. "They're coming here and renting land, instead of dealing with a lot of

overhead. Research comes right out of the laboratory into an applied research plot. It's neat to be involved in the cutting edge products coming down the pipeline."

Farmer access to research information at Agricenter is crucial, noted Bradley. At Milan, Bradley's opening of the farm's research to farmers turned the once unusual practice of no-till into a widely accepted concept and in the process created one of the pre-eminent field days in the country.

"We have a lot of good experiment stations in the United States and Southeast. But sometimes they don't always know how to invite people on the station to show them what they're doing. They're doing good research, but you have to work with industry and the media to promote it and get your researchers to tell the story of what they're doing. Farmers want to know where the extra dollars the companies spend on research go."

The latter is the idea behind the AgTechnology Field Day, which will be held at the Agricenter, on Thursday, July 19, from 7 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Fifteen leading agricultural companies will demonstrate their latest technology in cotton, corn, soybeans and rice. Official variety trials will also be on display. (See more on the field day in accompanying sidebar).

Bradley didn't have a lot of time to prepare for this growing season at Agricenter, having been on the job less than six months. He spent much of the first few months getting used to the lay of the land and learning the specific histories of each field.

"Everybody has been real helpful. We've maintained if not increased the number of research plots we've taken on. I'm very confident and comfortable with the job, but some days you wonder if you can get it all done. One challenge is bringing inputs into the Agricenter. Seed and fertilizer has to come from farm supply companies more than 35 miles away."

In keeping with Bradley's long-time dedication to conservation-tillage, about a third of the cropland at the Agricenter is now no-till, which will help build organic matter on the farm. Bradley says winter wheat will likely be planted on cropland this fall.

There are almost 900,000 people in the urban area surrounding the Agricenter, a much different landscape than what Bradley dealt with at Milan. Over 90,000 automobiles pass by Agricenter every day, making it one of the most visible research farms in the world.

Being in the public eye "can mean that people see a different use for land other than agriculture. But we want to keep the core of Agricenter as a research center."

Bradley will have an ongoing job as a spokesman for the facility, along with Agricenter president John Charles Wilson, a former cotton producer from west Tennessee. Everything matters when the general public is this close, from the appearance of the farm to its profit margin to questions about what the farm does.

"I welcome the questions," Bradley said. "Anytime someone from the general public can have a better understanding of what agriculture is about, genetic engineering or precision agriculture, I want to exchange their concerns."

The land and buildings at Agricenter are owned by Shelby County, but Agricenter is privately operated by a 30-member board of directors. Another oversight body is the Agricenter Commission appointed by the Memphis mayor's office.

e-mail: [erobinson@farmpress.com](mailto:erobinson@farmpress.com)