Livestock science will benefit sub-Saharan Africa

February 19 2012

Africa will benefit greatly from advances in livestock science that will benefit the animals and the people they provide with high quality protein, said scientists here Sunday.

Panelists addressed the hopes and challenges of modernizing livestock production in Sub-Saharan Africa during the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Vancouver, B.C.

"We explored how implementing new technologies will benefit society," said University of Idaho animal scientist Rod Hill. He studies physiology in cattle, focusing on topics including feed use efficiency and muscle development.

"The issue is," Hill said, "how do we get them to work best for mankind and benefit societies in Africa."

Hill, an associate professor of animal science in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Idaho, organized the session with Albert Medvitz of McCormack Sheep and Grain in Rio Vista, Calif. The American Society of Animal Science sponsored the session.

Medvitz and his wife, Jeanne McCormack, operate a 3,700-acre ranch that has been in her family for 120 years. The couple, who met in the Peace Corps in Africa, produces wheat, and sheep and goats on pasture without importing grains or using antibiotics.

"We wanted to look at how new technologies are changing how we raise livestock," Hill said, "And how do we get them to work to best advantage for the benefit of mankind and societies ranging from developing communities in Africa to highly developed ones in the United States."

As in many areas where science meets society, opinions differ, Hill said.

"There are opposing views in every aspect of technology and technology development. We don't seek to support a particular perspective," he said, "except that implementation of new techs is going to have long term benefit to society.

"We're going to have 9 billion people to feed with limited agricultural resources over the next 25 to 30 years, so that's a huge challenge for agriculture," Hill added.

Panelists included Charlotte G. Neumann of the UCLA School of Public Health, who spoke about how animal agriculture builds human capital by boosting nutrition. Neumann focused on studies that confirm foods from animals increased both the mental and physical development of children in sub-Saharan Africa.

The private sector is stepping up its efforts to bring science to traditional livestock keepers. Christie Peacock, chairman of Nairobi, Kenya-based Sidai Africa, Ltd., reviewed her organization's efforts to establish a chain of stores that will provide reliable vaccines and other services.

The focus on high quality veterinary and other livestock services includes reliability testing of products and an emphasis on preventative care.

Panelist Appolinaire Djikeng of the International Livestock Research Institute based Nairobi, Kenya, explored the advanced agricultural

biotechnology laboratories that have been established in Africa. Their goal is to focus on problems constraining Africa's development that once seemed intractable.

Jeannie Harvey of the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined the panel to discuss the overall themes presented during the session. An expert in women's roles in agriculture, Harvey is former director of the University of Idaho Women's Center.

"One point we felt was important to make goes with the old saying that if you teach a man something, you affect one person," Hill said, "but if you teach a woman something, you influence the entire family."

Hill also has proven adept at organizing discussions of animal science related topics on the largest stage in U.S. science. The annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science typically draws some 6,000 scientists and an international media contingent or 700 or more.

Hill serves as the American Society of Animal Science delegate to the AAAS. This marks the third symposium he has organized for the associations' annual meeting. Past sessions have focused on nanotechnology and food science.

Provided by University of Idaho