

Get Off the Treadmill and on to the Moving Sidewalk

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Yet another researcher has published a report predicting major changes in agriculture. This time it is Robert Napier of Orange Agricultural College, The University of Sydney, Australia. The report is titled *'The Impact of Biotechnology on the Production Sector: Will Farmers be Winners or Losers?'* Biotechnology is a major driving force for these changes. However, it is by no means the only driving force. Increased consumer demands for consistency, food safety, convenience, choice, reliability of supply, inexpensive food supply, and sustainable production practices do not depend solely on biotechnology. Development of differentiated traits can and is being done by conventional breeding using no biotechnology. Recent resistance to GMO's will likely slow the development of biotechnology while society wrestles with the ethical issues of moving DNA from place to place. A slowdown in the development of biotechnology may slow the trends predicted by Napier, but won't prevent them.

A few of Napier's predictions are:

- ✓ A shift from production driven to market driven agriculture
- ✓ Increased consumer demands for consistency, food safety, convenience, choice, reliability of supply, inexpensive food supply, and sustainable production practices
- ✓ Reduction in the number of farm businesses
- ✓ Low margins on undifferentiated products
- ✓ Opportunities for value adding and market niches

Napier is not alone in predicting these changes. Many people in different facets of food and agriculture are predicting similar changes. Napier further predicts that winning farmers will have the following characteristics:

1. Broad managerial and learning capabilities
2. They will be flexible in developing new enterprises and strategies
3. They will work closely with researchers to aggressively manage the changes
4. They will achieve economies of size through innovative business structures and cooperation with others
5. They will move quickly and decisively to become part of win-win alliances – they will seek interdependence
6. They will have the capability to perform identity preserved production, monitoring and recording all operations to ensure quality and trace-ability

The same message keeps coming through: Farmers need to be good at everything they do today, plus they need to be good at a number of new things. You will probably agree with me when I say that farmers already have to be good at too many things to have any reasonable expectation of being good at all of them.

Oh, there is one thing Napier and others say you need to focus on less – production agriculture. I agree with Napier on most things, but I happen to seriously disagree with him on this. More about that later.

So, what does a farmer do in a world where agriculture is rapidly changing; where to be a winner you have to be good at more and more things? Sell the farm and find an easier occupation? No! There is a better way.

Get off the treadmill and on to the moving sidewalk!

You know what moving sidewalks are - many large airports now have them. You get on them and you walk the same speed, but you go faster. That is the key to thriving in these times of rapid change – learning how to move faster without working harder. Being able to do this allows us to thrive in times of change, and to thrive without the stress that change often brings.

How does a farmer get on the moving sidewalk? Here is how:

1. Identify the critical functions of your farm operation that you are good at and continue to focus on them.
2. Identify the critical functions of your farm operation that you are not good at or don't have time to do and find other resources to perform these functions.

It is likely that you are doing some of this already. For example, many farmers do not want to take the time to understand and follow the markets. So, they hire a marketing consultant to do this for them. Some farmers are very good mechanics and do their own repairs. Others don't have the mechanical skills or the time so they hire someone else to do their repairs. The changes in agriculture are requiring new skills. Farmers need to assess which of these new skills they possess and have time to perform, and which ones they need to find other resources to perform. I believe that the single most important characteristic of winning farmers is #5 from the list above:

They will move quickly and decisively to become part of win-win alliances – they will seek interdependence

The strength of most farmers is production agriculture. I believe that being good at production agriculture will become more important, not less important in the future. There will always be a reward for being a high yield, low cost producer, whether you produce commodities or value added identity preserved products.

Many farmers have the skills to produce higher value, identity preserved products, but they may not have the contacts or the skills necessary to identify their own opportunities. Farmer alliances are beginning to form to help farmers work together to meet the needs of buyers. These alliances and cooperatives may be an important part of connecting your production to a higher value marketplace.

Get off the treadmill and get on the moving sidewalk. Start figuring out where you need help and become part of the alliances that will be your key to being successful in these times of rapid change in agriculture.