

# It's a gift that only farmers can give



## For Starters

By CHERRY BRIESER STOUT

**M**AKING my home in a remote mountain village in southern Africa back in 1980, I faced my first summons for help with a sinking stomach.

On my doorstep was an elderly vilager who introduced himself by his African name (which I've long since forgotten) and by his English name: George. In George's hand was a dead chicken, which he dropped at my feet. "I desire to know why my chicken died," he said in a British accent cultivated back in the days when Lesotho was a British colony.

"I'm not an expert on poultry," I confessed, explaining that I'd been sent by the U.S. Peace Corps to help people in the village to grow vegetables. I offered up a guess, however, that the chicken

might have died from coccidiosis, the first and only poultry disease that came to my mind.

I later found out that "Chicken George" was a retired ag specialist with the Lesotho Ministry of Agriculture.

I'm still not sure if I passed the test, but the incident was one of those defining moments that made me realize at the time just how demanding day-to-day life was going to be in Africa. Not only did I face the daunting task of learning a new culture and language, but I was beginning to appreciate just how tough it would be to address the agricultural needs of subsistence farmers.

Turns out I failed miserably in my attempts to eke out vegetables from the poor, eroded soils in the mountains of Lesotho. However, I did learn some valuable lessons about garden site selection, the critical need for a good water supply and animal control. I had plenty of time to ponder those prerequisites while carrying water to a garden halfway up the mountainside, and while trying to drive off marauding goats and cattle from helping themselves to tender garden plants.

An African village needs a lot more

than an American Peace Corps volunteer handing out bags of seed to create a sustainable food system. During my two years in sub-Saharan Africa, I saw some worthwhile work being done by the U.S. Agency for International Development, and by Canadian and Dutch groups.

### A better way

An organization called the Foods Resource Bank offers a new approach that begins with a crop raised by a generous farming community in rural America. This year, the FRB worked with 200 community-based Growing Projects in the United States on 7,000 acres of crops. The sale of those crops will generate about \$1.8 million for building wells, irrigation systems and greenhouses; for buying tools and seed; and for setting up livestock operations and other sustainable food programs in 32 impoverished countries.

*Prairie Farmer* columnist Penny Lauritzen coordinated one of Illinois' 22 Growing Projects and traveled to Guatemala where she saw the direct benefits of this program. Don't miss her story on Pages 54 and 55.

The FRB takes to heart the lesson

about teaching a man to fish, instead of giving him fish to eat for a day.

"FRB does not ship any food abroad," notes Norm Braksick, FRB's volunteer executive director. Braksick is retired from a successful 35-year ag business career, first with UpJohn, and then as president of Asgrow Seed Co.

He explains that sending food abroad is inefficient, with the bulk of dollars chewed up in logistics. "If we buy \$1 worth of grain in the U.S. today, it costs 60 cents to get it overseas," says Braksick.

Granted, some countries, like war-ravaged Ethiopia do need food aid, but it's only a temporary band-aid over the hunger problem, says Braksick. Sustainable food security is the only real answer. Helping people know the dignity and pride of feeding themselves is the way to go.

And for Illinois farmers, I can't think of a better gift to give the world than to be involved in a Growing Project.

■ For more information or to get involved in a Growing Project, go to [www.foodsresourcebank.org](http://www.foodsresourcebank.org) or call (269) 349-3467.

**See more on page 33.**

# Keep the farm bill on the front burner



## Guest Editorial

By WILLIE VOGT

**T**HE elections are over, the results known and no matter who controls the House and Senate, farmers should keep one thing in mind: The 2007 Farm Bill looms ahead.

Last time around, the farm-bill debate ended with a compromise that had most groups happy. However, four years of Environmental Working Group information, the constant hammering on farm programs by other groups unaware of the true economics of ag and a popular press that has become more focused on Lindsay Lohan's latest date may bring a changed legislative environment.

The debate on the 2007 Farm Bill could be the most contentious in years. The Bush administration, through Ag

Secretary Mike Johanns, has done a good job of delivering the message that the old bill will not be extended as a "new" bill.

For groups with the most to lose, the fight for payments and keeping payment limits at bay remains the biggest challenge; and this 2007 Farm Bill may come out of the debate with less change than we predict.

Johanns has taken a different approach to this farm-bill creation effort. With 50 farm-bill listening sessions around the country — 22 of which the secretary sat in on — farmers, ranchers and other interested parties had their say. Transcripts of all those sessions were made available to the public.

USDA also prepared briefing papers on key topics from those events from rural development to conservation. This may be the most thorough homework any administration has ever done

in advance of major legislation. Yet there are forces at work that could bring more controversy to the debate.

### Public opinion shift?

You may find the public less receptive to farmers than in the past. When farmers were perceived as producers of food, there was always the "everybody's got to eat" message. Today, when a lot of what you raise may be turned into fuel, carpet or plastic, does the "everybody's got to eat" message remain strong?

Sure, everybody's "got to drive," but is fuel what people want to support? That answer might be "yes."

A recent poll by the Biotechnology Industry Organization shows a majority of those surveyed want to support bio-fuels and their development. That's super news since the poll also showed those respondents support government programs and subsidies for renewable

fuels. Yet you'll find the popular media doing its best to stoke the fires on the food-versus-fuel debate.

Add it all up and the farm bill may no longer be about feeding the world and supporting America's farmers. It may be about fueling America with domestic, renewable resources and keeping the cost of food low.

We're not going to predict the outcome, but this is no time to sit on the sidelines. Whether you have a new representative or you re-elected an incumbent, this is a time to be in touch. They need to know all the issues surrounding ag programs.

This time around, even big-city senators have to listen because expensive imported fuel is causing them a headache from their in-town constituents.

Tell your story, and don't wait for someone else to do it for you. Stand up now, or sell later.