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UI takes lead in $20 million climate change research project

Originally printed at http://www.klewtv.com/news/local/116511908.html

By KLEW Web Staff and UI Communications February 20, 2011

MOSCOW - The University of Idaho will lead research to better understand and plan for a changing climate in the Pacific Northwest.

The five-year, $20 million USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture award will fund the work of a research team led by University of Idaho entomologist Sanford Eigenbrode.

His team includes researchers from Idaho, Washington State University and Oregon State University, and the USDA Agricultural Research Service. The team will study impacts of climate change on Northwest wheat and barley production, according to a news release from UI.

“The University of Idaho is committed to work that serves our state and our region,” said M. Duane Nellis, president of the University of Idaho. “As the lead institution for this vital climate research, we welcome the USDA’s investment in work that will study not just the effect of climate change on agriculture – a key industry in the region – but also will help us innovate and advance agricultural production and education for the future. This work will truly be a model that defines the power of collaborative research to transform our region and enables our knowledge and discoveries to better serve the global community.”

Eigenbrode and the team will focus on cereal production systems of the inland Pacific Northwest and their management under projected climate change scenarios for the region.

The announcement was made Friday morning on the U of I campus.

"The climate is changing, and warmer, wetter, more variable precipitation is coming," said Eigenbrode. "That requires new practices and better adoption rates."

U of I Vice President for Research and Economic Development Jack McIver said this is the largest single grant they've received and that the Palouse area is the perfect place to conduct this kind of research.

"The Columbia River Basin is a huge laboratory with the ingredients for success and for studying climate change mitigation," said McIver. "It has diverse climate, a variety of soil types, it has the right topography. It's got quality researchers and it has three very good land grant universities that are working together."

The research will be a five year collaboration. The studies will focus on cereal production systems of the Inland Northwest and how manufacturers and grain growers can adapt to changes in regional climate.

Sales of cereals totaled more than $1.5 billion in 2009, as the Northwest grew 13 percent of the nation's wheat and 80 percent of the country's soft white wheat exports. Some predictions indicate that changing temperatures and precipitation will affect the Northwest and other prime wheat regions.

"It's going to affect cereal production differently in different areas," said McIver. "It may allow for the instituting of a different kind of rotational cropping systems in this particular region."

The three universities have already conducted some research on the subject and the grant will allow them to take it further.

Sonny Ramasway, dean of OSU's College of Agricultural Sciences, agreed. "As a result of this project, the people who produce our food will be better equipped to reduce their carbon footprint and to face the challenges associated with climate change," he said.

The project grew from a collaborative research project launched nearly four decades ago to reduce soil erosion in Washington, Idaho and Oregon. That effort, called STEEP – Solutions to Environmental and Economic Problems – coalesced as a cooperative effort by the three states in 1975.

"This new project will draw on the STEEP program, which cut soil erosion by 75 percent, and helped farmers make their practices more sustainable to assure the future of Northwest agriculture," said John Hammel, Idaho agricultural and life sciences dean.

Dan Bernardo, dean of the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences, said the project is unique in several important ways. "It is

interdisciplinary and inter-institutional, but it is also unique in the sheer magnitude of funding and scope. This larger, integrated, coordinated effort truly has the potential to be transformational for wheat and barley producers in our region."

Howard Grimes, vice president for research at WSU, praised the project for "anticipating and proactively developing solutions for a future challenge. Once completed, this work will give wheat and barley growers the tools they need to evaluate and adapt to climate change as the change occurs."

Eigenbrode will lead a team that includes 22 principal investigators, 14 graduate students, three post-graduate researchers, and several technical and administrative staff. They will create a region-wide research, outreach and education network to address the complex issues raised by changing climate.

The team's areas of expertise will include agronomy, climate and atmospheric science, entomology, plant science, weed science, sociology, soil science, ecology, agricultural economics, education, Extension and information science.

In the long-term, the vision for the project is to create a comprehensive and extensive infrastructure to support research, outreach and education that will support agriculture sustainability in the region during the project's funded five-year term and beyond, said Eigenbrode.