In March, President Obama appointed Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy as director of the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Ramaswamy, an entomologist, grew up in India at a time when food was scarce. However, he also experienced firsthand how research – especially agricultural research – can transform a country for the better. Throughout his career, Ramaswamy served in administrative and educational and research capacities at multiple land-grant universities across the country. Prior to joining NIFA, Ramaswamy was dean at Oregon State University’s College of Agricultural Sciences. Progressive Dairyman Editor Dario Martinez followed up with Ramaswamy to discuss NIFA's current research endeavors, including those connected to the dairy industry.

**How will your previous experiences help you in your new role as director of NIFA?**

**RAMASWAMY:** I grew up in India in a food-insecure situation. I had the privilege of coming to the U.S. and have been educated because of American taxpayer investments. America provided food aid to India. I also met Norm Borlaug, “the father of the Green Revolution,” when I was an undergraduate student in the early 1970s in India. All of this had a huge influence on me.

I’ve been at multiple land-grant universities, beginning in India. I have a very broad perspective that few others have because they tend to stay at one institution and they have a much more narrow focus. In some ways, my experiences contribute to my thinking about the challenges that we face as humanity a little bit differently.

To be thinking of the fact that it’s not just about food and agriculture, it’s also about jobs and the economy. It’s about agricultural competitiveness. It’s about farmers and ranchers and putting a few more dollars in their pockets. This is the perspective that I bring to the table.

**How does the NIFA benefit dairy producers?**

**RAMASWAMY:** NIFA’s bottom-line mission is to invest monetary resources to enable research that advances our food and agricultural enterprise. That’s a very broad enterprise and within that enterprise is animal agriculture. This is a significant part – because it is not enough for somebody to just consume calories. One could live on just calories, but then the quality of life becomes pretty poor. What protein does, is it enhances that quality of life. Dairy is a very significant part of our protein intake. When you look at dairy products, whether it’s milk, cheese or yogurt, these products are all pleasurable, healthful and they enhance our quality of life.

In the portfolio of investments that we make, NIFA certainly provides funding for many different types of endeavors – everything from nutrient management and water use to milk quality and value-added processing to food safety issues to genomics to bioenergy. There’s a pretty wide portfolio even within the dairy endeavor, including food safety, manure management or the occurrence of particulates in the environment. If you have an operation, whether its five, 100 or 3,000 cows, you still have to deal with manure and particulates. This is the breadth of issues that the National Institute of Food and Agriculture supports.

**What are some of NIFA’s current research priorities?**

**RAMASWAMY:** Our research priorities are organized around five themes from nutrition and childhood obesity to food safety to climate change to food security to sustainable bioenergy. Within each theme, there are a slew of sub-priorities, whether it’s animal production, plant production, dealing with insects and pathogens or dealing with the specifics of food safety or youth and family issues. All of our priorities revolve around those thematic areas.

From a dairyman’s perspective, our research priorities have a play in every one of those five areas when you think about it — food safety, nutrition and even climate change. These are the type of issues that we deal with and support research in. I think dairymen, unbeknownst to most people, have been at the forefront of the alternative or sustainable energy area with anaerobic digesters and the possibilities that derive from them.

**How would you describe the state of funding for research in agriculture today?**

**RAMASWAMY:** It’s not commensurate with the needs. We’re reaping the benefits of investments that America made in the 1950s. Now, we need to make investments for the next 40 years, when the earth’s population is predicted to reach about 9.5 billion people.

Putting that into context, what should we be doing now? How are we going to raise our cows? Are there different ways of doing it? Are there better ways of improving nutrient management? Are there better ways of utilizing water? Water is a huge challenge for dairy, and we should be making investments in that area.

Things are going a-begging. The part of the American economy that agriculture is part of, what it contributes to, the enormity of the challenges and the investments we make as a nation, is unfortunately not commensurate. Add to that the situation at the state level and you end up with a double whammy – because many states are having a lot of difficulty with the economic situation.

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What could the dairy community do to improve its chances for funding for new research initiatives?

RAMASWAMY: Speaking with one voice. I think that one of the challenges that we face with agriculture in America is that everybody is interested in supporting these endeavors but they want to protect their interests. So it’s self-interests at the end of the day. But if there are self-interests translating into community interests and community interests translating into self-interests, then we are all going to come out ahead.

We need to be thinking about how research enables America to be several steps ahead of the competition, so that we can export dairy products. Today we are exporting rather than being the importer that we were just a few years ago. That resulted because there was a lot of research that went into it that was enabled by public investments, which are now paying dividends. If we can all speak with one voice, whether it’s going to Congress or to the local state legislatures and bringing in private enterprise, as a new compact, I think we are going to make a lot of headway.

This is not a Republican issue or a Democrat issue – it is an American issue. We are global leaders when it comes to food. However, if we’re interested in ensuring America’s competitiveness on a global scene, we’re going to have to think of how to make the investments necessary to keep us ahead of the game. Every dollar invested in agricultural research returns $20 to $30. Unbelievable! There is no other enterprise where you have that sort of a return on investment.

What do you hope to accomplish during your time with NIFA?

RAMASWAMY: The number one thing that I would like to accomplish is for food and agriculture to be recognized as an important part of our nation’s enterprise. If I can get that done in six years, I’d be very happy. Obviously, I want to go around and use it as a bully pulpit … and be unapologetic, excited and passionate about it.

The second thing that I want to do is really convince people and Congress that, at the end of the day, we are responding to you. We listen – and my agency is not doing things unilaterally. Everything that we do is all stakeholder-driven. There are no unilateral decisions made by me. And getting the commensurate resources, as well, would be the three things that I would like to accomplish in the next six years.

What research projects has NIFA recently supported that you are most interested to see the results of?

RAMASWAMY: There are a lot of them. With one of them that I saw, I just said ‘Wow!’ I saw a project funded at Penn State in which starch was used to create these new membranes to enhance the capability of lithium ion batteries that go into electric vehicles and things like that. Who would have thought? Poor old agriculture, which is treated like a poor country cousin, to be able to do that? It goes back to this unbelievable innovativeness of the agricultural enterprise. I can’t wait for another two or three years to see what happens with this project.

Have you had any experience working with the dairy industry in the past?

RAMASWAMY: I’ve never actually been involved in hands-on research or education in the dairy endeavor. Even as an entomologist, I worked primarily on plant-feeding insects. But there are a couple of interesting tangential things that I’ve done, one of which does touch directly on dairy.

When I was dean at Oregon State University, my number one commitment was to help the animal science department become a player. Over time, the animal science area had lost significant capacity. One of the things that we did was work with the Oregon dairy industry to endow a dairy faculty position. It’s pretty interesting to see what was possible working in partnership with the dairy industry.

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