Dr. Catherine Woteki is Undersecretary for USDA’s Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area, as well as the department’s chief scientist. Her responsibilities include oversight of the four agencies that comprise REE: the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS.) The National Agriculture Library and National Arboretum also fall under this mission area. Progressive Dairyman Editor Karen Lee had the opportunity to speak with her at the American Dairy Science Association annual meeting this July.

Q What types of research will you be focusing on in the next five years?

A WOTEKI: We’re actually going through a process right now of identifying what the core research areas will be under different budget scenarios. We’ve identified that there are four major research directions. The first one is food security, both domestic and international. That is where the focus on production agriculture is. The second area is natural resources and the whole concept of managing our agricultural lands in a sustainable manner. The third area is food safety and the fourth area is human nutrition.

Q What influenced the selection of these four areas of research?

A WOTEKI: At the agency level, we have a well-established mechanism for consulting with stakeholders. Since I’ve been in the role of undersecretary and chief scientist (since last October), I’ve started a review across the board of our research programs and have done a lot of consultations with stakeholder groups. Out of those consultations has come this set of priority areas.

Q What is the current administration’s stance on biotechnology?

A WOTEKI: I can tell you from the agriculture perspective, biotechnologies are a very important part of our research program. Looking at the challenges of food security, both domestic and international, we look to biotechnologies as a way to improve classical breeding, as well as employing the new genetic technologies to produce better disease-resistant and pest-resistant crops and livestock.

Q Secretary Vilsack recently announced a biotechnology advisory committee; what is that committee charged with doing?

A WOTEKI: The committee that we’ve just announced is going to be providing advice to the secretary and to the department. Coming out of the consultations he’s had around the topic of coexistence of biotech with traditional crops as well as organic crops, there is a set of questions that are going to be the agenda for this committee.

Q Where does biotechnology fit in the future of America’s food supply?

A WOTEKI: I think it’s already an integral part of our food supply here in the U.S. if you look at the food and feed crops, particularly corn and soybeans, and if you also examine the insights that have come from genomics as well as the technologies that have been built off of those insights to improve conventional breeding. One example is the bovine chip that has allowed dairy breeders to identify high-producing animals very early in life. The result has been a dramatic increase in milk production per animal and per herd. Biotechnologies don’t necessarily equate with genetically modified crops or livestock, but there are a lot of other new approaches because of these insights and biotechnology that can be used in traditional or conventional breeding, and we’re seeing the payoffs from them.

Q What challenges does biotechnology face?

A WOTEKI: One challenge is certainly in consumer understanding of what it means. Another challenge is in the global trade area with respect to genetically engineered crops.

Q Can these challenges be overcome? How?

A WOTEKI: As an optimist I believe yes, they can be overcome. One of the things that we’re very much interested in is letting the public know more about what the benefits have been of the research investment. One way to overcome the challenge of public understanding is to provide more information to consumers in ways that are understandable and also make use of a lot of the new technologies. We’re moving in those directions with Twitter and blogs and various other approaches. We’ve also put the ARS magazine and the ERS magazine up on our website, so those are accessible now through the USDA website. Just getting more information to consumers in ways that are understandable and fit with their lifestyle in the way that they like to receive information is important.

On the regulatory side and on the trade side, I keep thinking that the safety of biotech products is well demonstrated, and the resistance, particularly in Europe, will eventually go away.

Q What is the government doing to maintain and communicate the safety of our food system?

A WOTEKI: On the maintaining side, they are doing a lot. Both the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) and the

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Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have the immediate responsibilities for food safety. Certainly, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), with pesticide approvals that they do, also has a role to play. The agencies have really moved to science-based inspection systems. You can see that clearly in the HACCP system in FSIS and also with the HACCP approaches that the FDA has adopted in fish and in juice. The FDA is going to be implementing the Food Safety Modernization Act. I think over the coming months and years we’re going to see that it is a more science-based approach towards produce safety.

On the communicating side, people assume that their food is going to be safe, yet they do have an important role themselves in making sure that the food they’re preparing at home is going to be treated in as safe a manner as possible. The education programs, like FSIS has on food safety, I think are playing an important role in letting consumers know what they can do to maintain the safety of food once they get it in the household.

What role do farmers play in the safety of our food system?

WOTEKI: I think farmers play a big role, particularly in things like manure management and manure treatment prior to application to crops, but it’s not the only role. When you think about food safety, you need to think about it as a continuum from farm to table in which every person through whose hands that food moves has a role to play in maintaining or enhancing the safety of that food product.

What key pieces of the bill would you like to see retained from 2008?

WOTEKI: I haven’t thought of it that way. The positioning we’ve been taking has been that we’re ready to assist Congress in any analysis that they would want to undertake for the Farm Bill. We’re certainly well prepared to testify in our hearing about how we’ve implemented the 2008 provisions.

What role does science play in forming policy?

WOTEKI: From the areas I have worked in, science plays a very important role in forming public policy. I served in a previous administration as the undersecretary for food safety, where the new regulations being proposed had a science base. In my current role as the chief scientist for the department, I view an important part of that role is informing the policy decisions that the department is undertaking by what we know from science.

How does science maintain its seat at the policy table?

WOTEKI: There are multiple points, both at the legislative level as well as the regulation development stage, that scientists and our scientific societies have a voice, have an opportunity to come forward to present scientific evidence to inform the decision.

What is the status of the 2012 Farm Bill?

WOTEKI: There are a series of hearings being held in which multiple agencies within the department have been called to testify on how they’ve implemented the 2008 Farm Bill. It will certainly be up to the authorizing committees to determine what schedule they’re going to be following to come up with the next Farm Bill.