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Kansas State University partners to improve wheat breeding program

MANHATTAN, Kan. - A new public/private collaborative agreement is expected to result in improved wheat varieties for Kansas wheat growers. Kansas State University and Monsanto announced today a relationship that will allow both to improve their wheat breeding programs.

"Agreements of this type benefit the Kansas wheat growers because they will have a greater selection of improved varieties from both public and private wheat breeding programs," said Gary Pierzynski, interim dean of the K-State College of Agriculture and interim director of K-State Research and Extension. Pierzynski said both parties are free to form additional collaborative arrangements with other public or private entities.

"Specifically, Monsanto brings to the partnership technologies that will enable us to `genetically fingerprint those varieties," Pierzynski said. "It will help us select specific genetic markers to provide improvements, such as disease and pest resistance."

Allan Fritz, Kansas State University professor of agronomy and a wheat breeder said working with private industry will give K-State the ability to get improved varieties to market faster.

"For K-States program, this will provide breeders with accelerated wheat breeding processes, focusing our selection on plants that matter and targeting for critical traits," he said.

Fritz said K-State will continue to work with other public wheat breeding programs, as it has in the past. "It is essential we continue our interaction between the wheat breeding programs at other Land-Grant universities."

Stakeholders in the Kansas wheat industry participated and offered important input about principles that should guide such collaborations. "Kansas State University has a long history of working with wheat and in addressing stakeholder needs," said Ernie Minton, associate director of research for K-State Research and Extension. "This relationship is beneficial for the wheat industry as the collaboration will create opportunities for the improvement of agronomic performance and grain quality characteristics."

In addition, the 2009 survey results from the National Association of Wheat Growers called for technology investment to improve profitability of wheat as a cropping option.

K-State will continue efforts to develop and release wheat varieties with improved traits through the Kansas Wheat Alliance, Minton said. The goal is to benefit the Kansas wheat producer and the related wheat industry with improved traits.

Kirk Schulz, Kansas State University president, said, "This partnership leverages Kansas State's long-term investment in wheat breeding and increases our resources to continue this work. This type of innovative collaboration is necessary with limited state and federal resources."

Sean Gardner, Monsanto's global commercial wheat lead, added that the collaboration is an important step for the wheat industry, as it brings together the unique and complementary breeding research of Monsanto and Kansas State University to develop better wheat varieties for growers.

"Kansas State researchers have a wealth of experience and knowledge in the field, and with our proven breeding technology experience, we see this collaboration as an excellent opportunity to produce successful new wheat varieties," Gardner said.

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K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county Extension offices, experiment fields, area Extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus, Manhattan.

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