Implement a bend-but-do-not-break mentality

Have you ever heard of the defensive strategy “bend but do not break”? This strategy is used by many American football programs, including our beloved Buckeyes, to give up small losses, but not the fatal play.

At this point, I am ready to say that our food system plays a bend-but-do-not-break defense. It bothered me early in the pandemic to hear the claim “food production is broken and needs a complete overhaul” without any recognition for the resilience our producers have displayed. Did COVID-19 spotlight pressure points in our U.S. food system? Sure it did.

The conversations to re-envision the U.S. food system have already started. Many of the proposals call for a greater emphasis on smaller geographically distributed farms and food processing plants.

However, there is little evidence to support that a less concentrated system would have prevented the challenges we are witnessing in 2020. This pandemic hit us in arguably our most vulnerable spot: shortage of excess processing capacity. Agricultural production is not the problem here. Ethanol production did not decline due to lack of available corn, nor did meat supplies fall because there were not enough market-ready hogs or cattle.

Instead, the problem was the lack of extra processing capacity to absorb excess supply when plants closed, and the disruptions were impervious to scale. Without a doubt, one of the principles taught in an introduction to business course is the concept of inventory cost. Put bluntly, it is costly for businesses to hold inventory. Excess capacity is inventory and costly to processors. A system of smaller facilities all holding unused capacity will be burdensome in the long run. The appropriate level of excess capacity against higher costs is a value judgement and will play out in the policy arena.

This is the bend-but-do-not-break decision for processors, but what about producers?

Be resilient: Know your cost of production, have a marketing plan, and build liquidity. The saying “cash is king” does not mean stuffing cash under your mattress; it means having a healthy level of liquid assets. Be nimble: Balance efficiency with diversification. Be entrepreneurial: Seek unique opportunities. Be business-smart: Strategize, plan, execute, and evaluate.

I believe these four pillars are production agriculture’s bend-but-do-not-break defense. A high school coach once told me, “a flashy offense will win some games, but having both an offense and a defense will win you much more.” This theory applies to production agriculture, too. What are you doing to build your defense?

Ben Brown is an assistant professor in the CFAES Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics, and the program manager of the CFAES Farm Management Program. Brown’s column focuses on agricultural economics and will appear here periodically.
“Whether farm operators have questions on equipment and research. It was even easier this year to benefit from livestreamed talks and recorded videos featuring the latest farm livestock, the prospects of U.S. agricultural trade show watched many solutions as possible,” Zachrich said.

The annual talk given by CFAES agricultural economists focused on supply chains in food and agriculture. Many of those supply chains were tested earlier this year when many solutions as possible,” Zachrich said.

For the first time in its nearly 60-year history, the annual agricultural trade show was completely virtual. With a few clicks, people from across the Midwest and the world could easily tap into tips for increasing farm profits and growing crops from soybeans to hemp.

“It was even easier this year to benefit from the show’s valuable advice that can help farmers improve their businesses,” said Nick Zachrich, manager of FSR, which is hosted by CFAES.

“Whether farm operators have questions on finances, insurance protection, or which new tool fits their needs, resources are available through Farm Science Review online.”

All of the content from the Sept. 22 to 24 show can still be accessed at fsr.osu.edu.

Topics for talks at FSR this year included the state of the low-oxygen “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico; and the “4Rs” of nutrient management, which he said can help with all of those matters.

With many events canceled and disruptions across the industry because of the pandemic, Farm Science Review aims to provide as many solutions as possible.

NICK ZACHRICH
FSR manager

Can Ohio farmers raise their crop yields while meeting water quality goals? If so, how?

An expert from CFAES answered that question in a talk during this year’s Farm Science Review.

Greg LaBarge, agronomic systems field specialist with OSU Extension, covered “Water Quality and Nutrient Management: Can We Make More Money and Avoid Regulation?” as part of FSR’s “Ask the Expert” series.

In his 20-minute session, LaBarge looked at whether boosting yields and meeting water quality goals are compatible, this year’s harmful algal bloom situation in Lake Erie; the state of the low-oxygen “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico; and the “4Rs” of nutrient management, which he said can help with all of those matters.

The 4Rs stand for right source, right rate, right time, and right place. The practices offer farmers a way to get the most bang for their nutrient buck, helping to maximize crop yields while also reducing nutrient runoff. Nutrient runoff from farm fields—specifically, nitrogen and phosphorus—is linked to both Lake Erie’s algal blooms and the Gulf of Mexico dead zone. All of Ohio eventually drains into one of those bodies of water.

“Increasing yields “has to be a goal” to ensure economically viable crop production in Ohio, LaBarge said. And because most water quality issues today are related to nutrients, he noted, the 4Rs offer a “great foundation” for achieving that goal while protecting water.

FSR was held entirely online this year because of the coronavirus pandemic. If you missed LaBarge’s talk when it aired during the agricultural trade show, you can watch a recording of it at fsr.osu.edu.

New partners for farms and water

In northwest Ohio, water quality efforts are gaining a boost from a new CFAES partner, Cargill, the global agricultural company based in Minnesota, has recently started supporting the work of CFAES’ water quality Extension associates. In 20 counties in the region, which is part of Lake Erie’s watershed, the six associates are sharing knowledge on best nutrient practices, are working with farmers to implement the practices, and are doing on-farm research on the practices.

Cargill, for its part, is providing the associates with advanced technology, such as for monitoring water quality, while local Cargill sales reps are encouraging their client farmers to work with the associates.

It’s all for a project by the CFAES Water Quality Initiative, one with a triple aim: Improve water quality, boost soil health, and keep northwest Ohio farming productive.

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Photo courtesy of USGS EROS

Photo courtesy of CFAES Water Quality Initiative

Read more at go.osu.edu/BuyH.

Even more teaming with Cargill is to come, said Cathann A. Kress, Ohio State vice president for agricultural administration and CFAES dean. “She said, “we see this as an ongoing partnership.”
CFAES’ Gwynne Conservation Area hosted a robust lineup of talks during this year’s virtual Farm Science Review, Sept. 22–24. If you missed the talks during their livestreams, you’re in luck. You can watch the recordings—on topics covering forages, grazing, aquatics, woodlands, and wildlife—for free at the FSR website, fsr.osu.edu.

Catch up on the Gwynne’s conservation talks

In a normal year, thousands of FSR-goers explore the Gwynne to learn about land- and water-friendly practices and see them in use. The nearly 70-acre site—home to ponds, woods, grasslands, and wetlands—is at the west end of FSR’s Molly Caren Agricultural Center. Find details at fsr.osu.edu/gwynne-conservation-area.

Food, animal research

Consider partnering with CFAES faculty from the Food Animal Health Research Program in the study of animal disease and its connection to COVID-19. The Food Animal Health Research Program fund (#308144) supports animal-disease research to find solutions to COVID-19 questions of testing, treatments, vaccines, and other therapeutics. This research requires highly specialized lab equipment, expertise, and expensive techniques such as animal models. Contact the CFAES Office of Advancement at 614-292-0473 or faesdevcom@osu.edu to learn more.

The sweet taste of Buckeye maple syrup

Buckeye fans now can pour official Ohio State Maple Syrup on their pancakes. It comes from the university’s Mansfield campus, where students and faculty from CFAES’ School of Environment and Natural Resources (SENR) planned and are running a nearly 20-acre sugarbush. A sugarbush is a maple tree forest used to produce maple syrup.

The project’s co-leader, Kathy Smith, SENR forestry program director, said to her knowledge, the branded syrup “is a first for Ohio State.” Proceeds from selling it will support student scholarships at the campus’ EcoLab, of which the sugarbush is a part.

Sold in half-gallon ($50), quart ($24), pint ($16), and half-pint ($12) sizes, the syrup can be ordered from the project’s other co-leader, Gabe Karns, SENR visiting assistant professor, at karns.36@osu.edu.

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