2025 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue
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Speakers

- Brian Sikes | Board Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Cargill
- Wendy Wintersteen | Member, World Food Prize Foundation Board of Directors and President, Iowa State University

Transcript
Wendy Wintersteen:

What a pleasure to be here with all of you today. So we'll begin. Brian Cargill has had the business of nourishing the world for one hundred and sixty years. Today, your company operates in 70 countries. So, you have a global perspective on some of the challenges facing the world's food system.

Can you set the stage for what's preventing us right now from getting food to everyone who needs it?

Brian Sikes:

Thank you. Let me just start with thanking the World Food Prize Foundation for having me today. It's a privilege to be here. It's a privilege to be on stage with you, Wendy. So, thank you for that.

It's not lost on me that we're sitting in Iowa, which has a great history of impacting our food system, whether that's through innovation or great young minds and innovators. I'm going to share a couple of those if I can real quickly, one that's near and dear to my heart. One hundred and sixty years ago, William Wallace Cargill founded Cargill in Conover, Iowa. And we saw the company today and so it started here. Just 15 miles from there, fifty years later, Dr. Norman Borlaug was born.

So just two examples of individuals that have come out of this state and impacted. So, it's great to be here today. I'm going to paint the picture of the problems and I promise we'll get to some solutions, but the challenges or opportunities that we have

in front of us. We know that we're going to put first we start with the fact that we have 730 million people that are food insecure today.

We produce enough food for them that we don't get it to the right place at the right time at the right price. We're going to add another 500 million people in the next five years. We're going to move 500 million more people to the middle class and we know that changes diets when we do that. We're going to be short of fresh water five years from now for the demand that's needed if we don't do something different. We are going to build another trillion square feet of infrastructure to house those folks that are joining us.

That's the equivalent by the way of building a new New York City, all five boroughs every month between now and then. So we have a land issue, we've got climate change that we're dealing with, soil challenges for farmers around the world. And now we're beginning to deal with market access. So, which may be the biggest challenge that we have in front of us. And so lots of challenges.

The good news is that we have total confidence. I have total confidence that we will manage all of those challenges and meet the challenge in front of us. And we do that by putting farmers at the beginning of that conversation, which is what we're going to talk about. And it's going to take collaboration and innovation for us to get there. And so, maybe Wendy to you, I'll pose that question.

Dr. Borlaug came out of this state, as we said, had a huge impact. He was a force of nature. He used it, he had collaboration. Clearly, there was innovation.

So, what do we need today to make that happen again? And who should lead that?

Wendy Wintersteen:

Well, I do believe that it is all about collaboration. It's about public and private collaboration. All of us are working together to look at those challenges and find solutions. And when we think about who should lead it, it is an opportunity for land grant universities. As a president of the land grant university, you wouldn't expect me to say anything different, would you?

And it is really not about just one institution or one organization or agency leading it, it is again about public-private partnerships. And I think that as we look at the opportunities for those partnerships, we have to be focused on an investment in research. Never more than today is the need for that continued investment in research by the federal government, by state governments, by the private sector, by our private foundations to see the need for a continued investment in research, by that investment in extension. Our laureate, Mariangela Hungria, Norman Borlaug, always said, you have to take it to the farmers, and we're going to continue to need to do that. So, let's all continue to work together.

And I have to say to Cargill, thank you. Thank you for investment at Iowa State University over the years in research, for our investment in our global resource systems major. So, it's all of us together still in that public private collaboration to meet the need, to meet the future needs of farmers all over the globe. So, Brian, artificial intelligence has the potential to revolutionize everything from farm productivity to global supply change. How is Cargill thinking about AI? Where do you see it making the biggest difference in building a more resilient, sustainable food system?

Brian Sikes:

It's a big question. Clearly, the question that I get asked the most right now, and it's the topic of the day for sure. So, I'll start with just maybe stating the obvious, maybe not everybody would agree with that. But I do believe it's the most transformative technology or innovation of my lifetime. I do believe that there will be companies that embrace this and those that don't.

And I think we'll look back a decade and those that don't embrace the opportunities that it brings will be in the graveyard, if you will, of companies that just failed to adapt. I actually think as individuals that's true as well. We talked to our team a lot about engaging with technology. Certainly not in the near term. In our industry, we don't see that really replacing the person, but aiding the person.

So if you get replaced, it will be by somebody that's willing to engage with the technology. So how can we make jobs easier? We're using it across Cargill, really from farm to table in dozens and dozens of applications. It's just been, I'd say in the last six months that we've seen real results and real impact. I can think of many, I'll give you

a few specific examples, but we are using it in our ocean transportation business, we're using it in our port businesses on predicting times.

We're predicting moisture levels, content levels. We're arming our commercial teams to represent Cargill better at the customer's doorstep because of the complexity of Cargill that can gather the data across Cargill. So there's lots of examples of where we're using it and seeing good success. One specific one is a proprietary technology that Cargill has. I was in Freona, Texas two weeks ago at a beef plant.

I started in Plainview, Texas, which was just an hour from there. So, it was fun to get back home at a plant that's 65 or 70 years old and see them using the latest technology. So, it's proprietary camera AI technology that is available that gives us real time feedback, gives our teams real time feedback on how they're doing, boning product or getting meat off the bone. So I'll step back and say, why is that important?

Clearly yields are important, but The U.S. Beef industry, which is another topic of the news today, produces about 27 billion pounds of beef. So if we can improve yields across the industries by 1%, that's over 200 million pounds of food, meat that ends up on tables and in bellies and not in rendering. So it's important. It's also used to train our teams.

So there's a safety element to make sure that they're repetitive motion, how they're doing their job. There's a food safety element because there's times you need to sanitize a knife or something so we can train there. But it gives them instant feedback on what's being left on the bone that could come off. Kind of red, yellow, green, smiley faces. We're not using it as a hammer, but as an incentive.

So, we're the teams who want to see it. I was on the line and watching. How am I doing? The ones that do the best at the end of the day, maybe the most improvement are getting some kind of small recognition at the end of the week. But it's just one example.

We have so many examples in our plants where it's helping us from a safety standpoint, a predictive standpoint, not just on how we operate the plant, but again where these pinch points come together and we need to be careful with our folks. So safety, food safety, and the same at the farm gate. So there are so many examples of where AI is changing our business. So we need to make sure we get this technology

to the farmer. We need to do it in a way that they can afford it and understand it, and do the training that needs to be.

And one of the fears I do have Wendy is that we don't skip over those holder farmers. We need to make sure that they have access as well, because we can have an outcome we don't like if we don't make sure that happens. And so that means broadband networks and all the things that go with supporting that on farms. But we do believe, you asked the initial question, why do we produce enough food and why can't we get it there? Collaboration, innovation are part of it. But this technology to take the inefficiencies out of our supply chain, I really believe we're in unlock.

Wendy Wintersteen:

Great response. I think AI is something that we're going to see more and more of. And again, back to that important aspect of research to help us to continue to embed it in a way that it can be available to all farmers.

Brian Sikes:

Yes, I totally agree. So, farmer livelihood. Yes. You've spent your life working on improving yields and performance and farmer livelihoods. You have a great point of view.

So, as you think about the challenges and the opportunities that farmers face today, probably here in Iowa and across the world, what are the big challenges and opportunities you see?

Wendy Wintersteen:

Well, really has been a year of challenges for farmers in Iowa. And as we think about some of those challenges, we think about the extreme weather events that we've seen. Too much rain, not enough rain. That's a common theme for farmers. We think about some of the financial pressures, certainly in Iowa, that's a conversation around every coffee table, I think, in every cafe around the state.

Market access, the uncertainty of market access today, labor shortages, emerging diseases continue to be an issue. That's agriculture, that's farming, I think, but the

challenges seem to be a little more extreme this year and last year and the year before. Right now, certainly in the Midwest and in Iowa, and then globally, you can think about those even being more magnified. But the opportunities are real. And if we go back to our conversation about AI and we think about really the incredible progress that we've seen in how smart the technology is that's available in our planters, in our sprayers, in our combines, and how we're working with really new ways to deliver that information to farmers.

Great faculty in ag and biosystems engineering, having planter university or sprayer universities to help farmers really know how to use that technology. Or we think about our veterinary diagnostic lab that was really the first veterinary diagnostic lab in The United States that understood and was able to diagnose the spread of avian flu to dairy cattle. Being prepared, having the network to understand what's happening out there and being able to respond. Or to think globally with our Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihood in the Kamuli District of Uganda, celebrating twenty years of meeting the needs to help small shareholder farmers. I looked up the data last night, and over that twenty years, 50,000 small shareholder farmers have received education to help them be more productive in livestock and crop production.

So great opportunity exists even amidst all the challenges.

Brian Sikes:

That's great. Yeah.

Wendy Wintersteen:

So Brian, can you tell us how you're seeing farmers in Cargill's supply chains overcome challenges, harness innovations, and shape the future of food security. What are you doing in partnership with farmers?

Brian Sikes:

You know, maybe I'll take a step back, Wendy, and just say that I grew up on a dairy farm that went out of business. And so I have a first heart for the challenges that farmers and ranchers face and perspective on that. And then I started in our beef

business on the shop floor. And so, I think I start with just the idea that we need to put the right to our farmers and frontline workers and, quite honestly, rural communities and make sure that we value those and understand the value they bring. So I start with that perspective.

So in my job, it's a treat to get to do what I do to grow up and live this life that I didn't know existed and to try to work with farmers and improve their livelihood. So start with that mindset. We've got some great success stories, many, many success stories. I'll start here in Iowa. There's a family farm, the Horax.

Alan is generation four. Emily, his daughter, is generation five. They farm corn, soy, and hay here in Iowa. And they were, Emily's already planning for her kids to take the farm, which will be generation six. And they were trying to figure out regenerative ag, carbon sequestration, soil issues to make sure that they're prepared for the next generation.

Our teams worked with them. The short story is now they have 100 of their land and with cover crops, and they've just seen great progress. They've seen improving water infiltration. They've had better yields. They've seen just better overall soil health.

So that's just one example. If we go to Africa, we're working with Harvest Plus. It's a great story on biofortified seeds. They're also nutrient dense. And so we've seen farmer livelihoods go up.

We've seen health go up. And the great part of this story is 50% of those farmers we work with are female farmers. And so then you think about family income, farm income going up. That ends up getting kids off the farm and into school. And we understand what that ends up, the impact that that can end up happening.

Maybe one more, Central America, there's an issue with tilapia farmers as it gets hot during the season, the water problems, bacterial problems and their mortality rates go through the roof. Our veterinarians on the ground, we work with Care International on this, and we've just been able to almost eliminate those mortality issues on the ground, again driving farmer livelihood improvement. So, lots of examples of how we do that and certainly on the ground with farmers trying to make sure at the end of the day they have markets available, they have the tools they need, and once that crop gets ready to go underground, they know they'll have

access and risk management tools if they so choose to use them. But it's the best part of my job, Wendy.

Wendy Wintersteen:

Well, I certainly believe that, giving those examples. I think, Brian, all across the industry, all across the land grant university, there are many, many examples of the good work that's been accomplished through research, through extension programs within The United States, within our global programs. And the examples, I think, that we've both given here really document that. But I'm going to ask you to go just a step further. I don't think there's really a need for us to be discouraged at this time.

But let's talk about what it will take for industry to achieve another Norman Borlaug moment in food and agriculture. What is it going to take to save another billion people like Norman Borlaug did? Give you hope?

Brian Sikes:

So I'm super optimistic. I really am. We've got all these great long term models we've had at Cargill for a lot of years. There's millions of data points from all around the world, we scrape data. All these things show us that we can do this.

But I think a few things have to happen, the things we've already mentioned. First, and I know I keep saying this, but I mean we need to embrace the role of the farmer. And I actually put the frontline worker with the farmer, which then means rural communities. They need good schools, they need good healthcare. They need childcare.

All of those things to support them because they need work. They need laborers. So we need to make sure we support it. And I think we haven't always done that and haven't always appreciated it. But I think COVID proved to us that they are heroes.

And we did keep food on the shelves because of them. And they couldn't go hide behind their computer like many of us did. So I think we start with that. The second thing is, we do have to embrace technology. And there's transformative technology that's here today.

You talked about on-farms already, the seed technology, the tractor technology, the precision farming, spraying, all those things. It's just going to keep getting better. But we have to embrace that and we also have to democratize it to some degree so that all farmers around the world can get access to that. And then the third thing is this idea of collaboration. If you think about climate change, it's happening fast.

So, these farmers are, the soil is changing, they're trying to change, they might be trying to change seeds, you got seed seed companies working at a really fast pace. But we got a regulatory system that's still from the 70s. And so the way you solve that I think is collaboration. We need government, we need institutions, we need private companies to work together to help solve these problems, so that we can move at pace and provide these solutions that our farmers need. And again, I'll go back to this.

We need to make sure that we have the technology, but we need to make sure they have confidence when they plant, that they're going to have a market to sell that into, and that they have the tools where that's risk management, logistics, whatever they need. Farmers are the greatest entrepreneurs. They care deeply about the land. They understand they have to take care of that land and water to pass it on to the next generation. But I'm completely optimistic we can do this, but we're going to do it together and not work in parallel.

So how about you? You share why you are optimistic?

Wendy Wintersteen:

Yeah. You know, building on your comments, Brian, we really do need a unified message of collaboration that we need that investment in research and extension in this collaborative partnership. I believe in that deeply, but I believe most in the next generation. In our project in the Komule District of Uganda that's funded by a family foundation, philanthropic investment, it's bringing over our students from Iowa State University, working with students from a Cary University, seeing that next generation come back with a changed mindset about how they want to invest in food security for the benefit of the world. It's that next generation that's going to make a difference.

It's the World Food Prize Youth Institute. It's all these young people that have joined us here this morning. That's what gives me hope. That is what is going to make a difference for the next generation, for the future. So, I will always have hope for the future because of the young people in this room.

So pleased to see them here with us today.

Brian Sikes:

Yeah, I just wanna, yeah. And I would just echo that for those that are here. I think the future is incredibly bright. I say at Cargill every time I stand up, we're 160 years old. I believe with all of my heart, the next decade will be our best.

The bigger the challenges, the more our people stand up and meet that. And I think the young people in this room and around that are listening to this and at our universities, we just need to inspire them and give them hope. So I think thank you, Wendy, for your time and your relationship that we have and have had for a long time. We value that very much.

Wendy Wintersteen:

We do too, Brian. Thank you so much.

Brian Sikes:

Thank you.

Wendy Wintersteen:

Thank you all.