



WORLD FOOD PRIZE FOUNDATION NORMAN E. BORLAUG INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE

2025 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue

Session Title: C-Suite Connect Series

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Speakers

- Introduction: Ben McLean | Chief Executive Officer, Ruan Transportation Management Systems
- Rodrigo Santos | Member, Board Management and President, Crop Science Division, Bayer Ag

Transcript

Ben McLean:

It is my great pleasure to welcome our next speaker. Rodrigo Santos is a global leader whose career reflects not only exceptional expertise in agriculture and business, but also a deep rooted commitment to innovation, sustainability, and the people who make our food systems thrive. As president of Crop Science Division at Bayer AG, mister Santos leads one of the most critical conversations of our time, how to feed a growing world while protecting the planet we all share. Under his leadership, Bayer has strengthened its role as a trusted partner to farmers, researchers, communities, driving forward bold innovations that align science with purpose. A native of Brazil, he spent significant time on his grandfather's farm learning the importance of concepts such as soil health.

His path through Bayer has taken him from sales and marketing to market development, strategy, and global operations across Latin America, Europe, and The US. Rodrigo brings over twenty five years of experience in the agricultural sector with a perspective shaped by both global markets and local realities. He is widely respected not only for his strategic acumen, but for his authentic leadership, always listening, learning, and always championing those who work the land. His approach reminds us that at the heart of agriculture are people, farmers, families, and future generations. And in every room into which he walks, Rodrigo brings that human element to the forefront of the business.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to Rodrigo Santos.

Rodrigo Santos:



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Well, that was an introduction. My god. Good morning. Really honored to be here to share this. Between you and a panel with the farmers and others, and I'm I'm you're eager to hear, I will just share some thoughts here with you on this one.

It's really an honor to be part of this dialogue, a coalition of will. We heard that today, and that's, I think, what it's really about this event is a coalition of will. How can we work together to make this planet better? I want to tell two stories. I'll talk about Joao and John, two farmers, one farmer from Brazil that I met recently and John, a farmer from here, close here, not far from here, that I also had the opportunity to visit two weeks ago.

One of the things that I have on my job that is really amazing, I have the opportunity to meet farmers. At the beginning of the year, I was in Kenya talking with the farmers and then in Mexico recently, but these two stories are interesting for me. And of course, one of them is connected with Dr. Mariangela Hungria that I have the pleasure to mention here as well as the recipient of the World Food Prize. And as you heard, I'm from Brazil as well, so we share that nationality.

But also we share something in common. We came from the same college. And like two weeks ago, I was doing my third year celebration of college. So I went to Brazil and I met my colleagues from the college. And one of them is a farmer, Joao.

And this farmer is in the Cerrados region of Brazil. If you think about the Cerrados region of Brazil, when we left college thirty years ago, Brazil was a major import of food. That region was not developed as it is today. One of the key elements to have impacted and made a major powerhouse of agriculture in that region was the work done by EMBRAPA and Dr. Mariangela Hungria, that is receiving the World Food Prize here as well this week.

The biological nitrogen fixation in soybean and all the work that EMBRAPA did for the Cerrados region of Brazil turning poor fertility soils, acid soils into really great agricultural land was really changing the lives of farmers. And I was talking with Juan, and we were going through this journey of thirty years that basically, if you think about Brazil, the area of soybean and corn increased 32%, the food production or the production increased by 260%. This was powered by yield, innovation and science, and one of the key elements of that was done by EMBRAPA and Dr. Mariangela



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Hungria. So it's an honor to share that and to congratulate her for this food price as well.

But that brought me also to Iowa back when I was with John, and we were walking in the field, a cornfield, and he was with a digital platform, and we were talking about agentic AI and how this will impact farming in the future here in the Corn Belt. But also we were seeing this cornfield is a short statue of corn, innovation that is coming to the market, and we are co creating with these farmers here in the U. S. And we were talking about that same field. He's a fourth generation farmer.

That same field he was mentioning, I remember, Rodrigo, when I harvested 105 bushels per acre, and this year, we're planning to harvest 300 bushels per acre on the same field. That transformation, that impact was amazing. And this is a little bit of what we were hearing today, what is needed for this planet. Because two key lessons for me on this journey that I had with those two farmers and many other farmers that I met. First one, farmers are resilient, and they steward the land, and they are entrepreneurs.

They drive through innovation and science. This is really important. Second one, and connected to the price here, innovation and science is a core element of that transformation. That is happening right now where we speak here, or it's happening in Africa, it's happening in Asia, it's happening everywhere in Latin America, in all parts of the agriculture sector. Innovation in science is extremely fundamental for that transformation.

Another one is collaboration. There is no single sector or stakeholder that will be able to make an impact by itself. Is the private sector, as we heard right now, with the public sector, with a national institute like EMBRAPA or many universities or different scientists working together making an impact. That field of corn, and we were talking about the next generation of innovation, thinking about if that transformation happened in the last ten years, can you imagine what will happen in the next ten years? And we were talking about nitrogen fixation and the work that we're doing for corn and wheat and rice and the challenge to do that versus what we did in soybean and all the innovation that's coming to that place.

Two things that came on that conversation with John that I want to just briefly share here that I think it's important. One, it takes all of us because the farmers were asked



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in the past to help feed this planet. And we talk about the amount of food and still the distribution of food is not as fair as we wish, and we still have people not without food on the table, a lot of people. But they were asked to feed this planet, but now they're calling for another one. We need to feed this planet as it grows and we just heard that we're gonna have a billion more people in Africa, but we're gonna need to feed this planet and protect the planet at the same time.

We need to produce more and conserve more at the same time. Farmers are asked to make that next transformation in the sector. There was a massive transformation in the past, another massive transformation ahead of them. How are we gonna produce more and conserve more at the same time? How can we produce and restore soil quality at the same time?

And that's the ask for all the farmers. Well, two things that come to our mind require all of us to make that happen. Right? All the different sectors and collaboration, coalition of will is a core element of what we're gonna discuss these two days here. That's the first piece.

The second one, of course, and this is what we do every day. So this is why we have 8,000 scientists working every day. The importance of science and innovation to drive that. And that innovation is coming from different areas. Right?

Some from companies like the one that I work, but from, again, universities, public institutes, startups. We need more innovation in ag. We have a gap of innovation in ag today globally. That's according to the FAO. And we need more innovation.

We need more science. But also what we need more and more, and I travel around the world and I'm hearing and having those debates, we need science driven regulation and welcome innovation in countries. And every time that you see that, you see a flourish of farmers doing that and working with that. So those are the second element. The final conversation with John and also when I had that conversation with Juan was that when we talk about producing more and conserving more at the same time, yes, agriculture is the solution for that.

We can produce more and we can reduce carbon emissions. We can restore carbon in the soil. It's possible. And farmers are willing to do that because like we saw here, and I remember again, I mentioned that I was working with my grandfather in the



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field, and he used to tell me we had a season that was not great. We did not have a good harvest when I was a kid.

I still remember that one. It was really bad. And he said, well, we need to learn to listen to soil. This was my grandfather, like, almost thirty years ago, and he, I don't think he could even imagine how accurate what he was telling me and what we are doing as an effort to hear the soil today for the future. At the end of the day, farmers, they store the land for the next generations, and that's what they do.

So I just wanna leave one word to you from you if you allow me to represent the private sector here. I have worked for Bayer now for almost thirty years in agriculture. What we saw in so many different countries is when we have the different stakeholders working together is when you have the transformation. We saw countries that transformed not only agriculture because agriculture is the main source of taking people out of poverty, and I saw that happening in different places. When you have the public sector, private sector, NGOs, science and community working together, this is what happens.

And we are not only proud and honored to be part of this coalition here and willing to do much more than we are doing today, bringing our contribution with innovation and science to farming. Thank you very much for having me here today, and I wish you a great day. Thank you.