

WHOLE GRAIN



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The Rice Industry Doesn't Know How to Quit

BY BOBBY HANKS

CROWLEY, LA — Aside from COVID-19, with its ripple effect that touched on every aspect of normal life, the U.S. rice industry was dealt several serious blows in 2020, from hurricanes and tornadoes in the mid-south to wildfires in California. So, when the ball dropped on New Year's Eve, we said "good-bye" to 2020 with high hopes for a kinder year.

But then, a couple of months into 2021, the mid-south got hammered again. This time with a catastrophic winter storm that shut down power and water to millions including rice mills across the region.

The mills around Crowley were closed due to treacherous road conditions. It was the right thing to do to ensure the safety of our employees, to keep them home and off the streets, and to minimize truck traffic. It also was a reminder of how interdependent our industry is; each step in the production process – planting, harvesting, milling, marketing – has to perform or the whole system falters.

In the aftermath of that powerful storm, the team here at Supreme Rice is taking steps to make improvements to minimize disruptions and expenses from future similar disasters. And I know other millers are doing the same thing, just like the farmers did after their weather challenges in 2020, because that's what successful businesses do when faced with adversity.


Resiliency is ingrained, pardon the pun, in the rice industry.



No longer just thinking about rice but finally in the field planting some.

Resiliency is ingrained, pardon the pun, in the rice industry. No matter the challenge – power outages, global pandemics, or climate change – we find a way to make it work with a combination of innovation, perseverance, and confidence (stubbornness probably belongs in that list, too). Now that the snow and ice have melted and all the equipment is primed and ready to go, it's time to get to work.

By the time this issue reaches you, the growing season will likely be well underway and we'll be looking ahead, but I think there's something about the arrival of spring that conjures up hope and possibility.

This season, I think we're more than ready for both – the hope that the country has turned the corner on the coronavirus and the possibility that the 2021 crop will be the best yet. 

LISTEN UP!

Two rice-related podcasts cover the U.S. industry from top to bottom, north to south, east to west, and all points in between!



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USA Rice is the global advocate for all segments of the U.S. rice industry with a mission to promote and protect the interests of producers, millers, merchants, and allied businesses.

USA Rice is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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STANDING PROUD

BY **BETSY WARD**

ARLINGTON, VA — Recently I was asked an interesting question on a podcast – okay, it was our own podcast, *The Rice Stuff*, but the question is still relevant. Michael asked me what I find to be the rice industry’s most important asset when it comes to advocating on behalf of our men and women. The answer to the question is the focus of most of this issue – our commitment to sustainability.

The rice industry, like no other industry I know or have worked for, places a supreme importance on sustaining our crop, our industry, our planet into the future. And that makes it easy, especially now, to stand proud with you.

Look at the cover of this newspaper. That young man inspires his dad, a Missouri rice farmer, to not only do right by some unseen consumer, but to do right by him – so that someday, if he wants to, he can farm the same land his father does now. And I’m confident that, no offense, he’ll do it even more efficiently.

Why am I so confident? Look at pages 8-9 where we highlight the new 2030 industry sustainability goals. These impressive goals come on top of the already laudable achievements our industry has posted in each of these metrics.

While goals like these can be established by us, and we can meet or exceed them, there are also external factors that will impact our environmental record and our profit and loss statements. Things like carbon banks, renewable energy, and government policies that will accompany them.




Betsy Ward and Tom Vilsack at a meeting in 2015 (during his first tour as the secretary of agriculture in the Obama Administration) to discuss the U.S. rice industry’s pioneering sustainability and conservation stewardship programs.

It was wonderful that Senator John Boozman asked our common constituent, Mark Isbell, an Arkansas rice farmer, to testify about climate change before the Senate Ag Committee in March. Mark’s insightful comments, and willingness to share his experiences did our whole industry proud. And you can read about it in Mark’s own words on page 10.

Alongside that article is the inspiring story of some of our members who are harnessing the power of the sun to improve their efficiency, their bottom lines, and my ability to stand tall with them and our whole industry to say, “we care about the future, it’s changing the way we act today, and you should help us meet our goals.”

In addition, I’m happy you’ll also find articles about regulatory issues, shipping challenges, a Who’s Who of the Biden Administration so far, our new consumer website, and more.

And to bring it full circle, please listen to our podcast. A podcast that dives into sustainability issues at least half the time. Even if you don’t “do” podcasts, you can listen online at www.thericestuffpodcast.com. Thank you! 

YOU’RE ON MUTE

BY **MICHAEL KLEIN**

ARLINGTON, VA — “You’re on mute,” was The Phrase of 2020. And as with other catchphrases, like “Cowabunga, dude,” “I’ll be back,” or “Kiss my grits,” it captures a specific moment in time.

2020 was the year most of the world went virtual and “Zoom” with a capital Z became a verb. In February 2020, if someone said to you, “Let’s Zoom tomorrow,” or “I heard it the other day when we were Zooming,” you might think a wellness check was in order. But one month later, these phrases were part of everyone’s vocabulary as in the name of public health and safety, people began working remotely if possible. Corporate travel policies were revisited, and in many cases, COVID-19, not Daddy, took the proverbial T-Bird away.

The offices of USA Rice, just outside Washington, DC, never actually closed, but staff were instructed to work from home as the severity of the pandemic became apparent. In-person meetings, whether small in our conference room, or with hundreds of people set to gather in Dallas in July 2020, were going away for the time being.

The list of events and meetings that were postponed, canceled, or moved online is nearly endless – from small regional gatherings in rice country to large national events like Commodity Classic, and massive international shows such as the National Restaurant Association Show, SIAL Paris, Fancy Foods, and others.

But now, in 2021, as it appears the corner is being turned on the pandemic with multiple effective vaccines available and Americans signing up for them in droves, the \$64,000 question is, “what now for meetings and events?”

Though we were all forced out of conference rooms and on to Zoom against our will, there are distinct advantages to the virtual platforms and they may be here to stay. Top of the list is time management.

USA RICE AND ZOOM By the Numbers*



328
Meetings

5,291
TOTAL MEETING
PARTICIPANTS

23 WEBINARS

805
Participants

262,148 Participant Meeting
MINUTES
(that’s 182 days!)

*March 2020 – December 2020



“I miss seeing folks in person and visiting, but I have to tell you, now a two-hour meeting takes two hours. Before it could take four days with all the travel. And that’s time away from my farm and family, it can be hard to justify,” said David Gairhan, an Arkansas rice farmer from Trumann and chair of Arkansas Rice Farmers.

Virtual meetings tend to run more efficiently than in-person versions as well. They start at the appointed time and there are few stragglers topping off their coffee or having a side conversation with another attendee.

Participation, which is so important for member-driven organizations like USA Rice, can improve online.

Quorums are usually easily achieved since every meeting takes place exactly where every individual is located. And with open virtual meetings, members and staff who wouldn’t typically attend meetings are now able to, keeping them abreast of important industry developments.

For anyone who has ever sat in a tight meeting room and had to jockey their seat with neighbors to get a clear view of the slides and presenters, problem solved: everyone has a front row seat now.

Getting the toothpaste back in the tube is going to be challenging.

While it’s easy to see how committee and board meetings can make a seamless transition to effective virtual meetings, what of networking events? Can they go virtual?

There’s no substitute for looking someone in the eye and knowing they’re actually looking back at you. Physically sharing a meal with another person remains one of the most intimate and meaningful things we do as a species. And if the meal is taking place at an auction or fundraiser, goading a friend to bid higher is important too.

In 2019 the USA Rice Political Action Committee (PAC) held three events, all were in-person. 2020 forced the organizers online and they were nervous about it. But the five or six virtual happy hours and online auction were exceedingly popular and the annual fundraising goal was surpassed. Participation was up because the events were taking place in every attendee’s home or office.

“Even when PAC events return to in-person, hopefully later this year, I think we’ll find a way to have a virtual component because people really liked it and took advantage of it, and in the end, the PAC benefitted,” said PAC Coordinator Josie McLaurin.

Conventions and trade shows are much harder to replicate online, but there are ways.

USA Rice experimented in 2020, turning typically in-person state rice research and outlook reports into a series of webinars. Sessions that usually draw 50-100 people in person had 376 people watching them live. And at least another 179 accessed the recordings from our video archive on YouTube.

We are also sometimes on the other side of the coin, exhibiting at trade shows. USA Rice set up a virtual booth at the annual Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo


when that trade show went virtual. Again, our staff was nervous about the outcome, but the event was a huge success and we directly reached many more people than we did at previous in-person iterations. Are you sensing a theme?

As this issue is going to press, the USA Rice Millers’ Association, which canceled its 2020 annual convention, is planning on a safe in-person event in June 2021 in Idaho. Attendees will need to follow state, hotel property, and USA Rice safety guidelines that will be informed by CDC recommendations, but organizers are confident it can be done.

It’s too early to say what will come of USA Rice’s July business meetings, scheduled for Dallas in July. The meetings went virtual in 2020 and participation and efficiency were high.

USA Rice’s flagship event, the USA Rice Outlook Conference, that ended up being canceled in 2020, looks to be on track for a December 2021 in-person return for New Orleans.

Will there still be virtual components of these and other events? Almost certainly. Why wouldn’t there be? We’d no sooner return to meetings that were only in-person or via telephone than we would give up our wide screen, high-definition color televisions to return to 4:3 black & white TVs.

We may have been forced into adopting this technology, but now that people see how easy, effective, and efficient it is, it’s going to be pretty hard to go back completely. Who wouldn’t want to have breakfast at home, participate in a far-flung meeting in the morning, make it to their child’s basketball game in the afternoon, and go to a fundraiser happy hour in the evening? Just remember to take yourself off mute. 

Michael Klein has a Zoom background for any occasion, from the control room in the movie “WarGames” to the Waffle House in Jennings, Louisiana, that he looks forward to frequenting again in person.

“... I have to tell you, now a two-hour meeting takes two hours. Before it could take four days with all the travel. And that’s time away from my farm and family, it can be hard to justify.”

— DAVID GAIRHAN, AN ARKANSAS RICE FARMER FROM TRUMANN AND CHAIR OF THE ARKANSAS RICE FARMERS

NEW THINKRICE.COM DEBUTS

BY DEBORAH WILLENBORG

ARLINGTON, VA — USA Rice recently debuted a new and improved thinkrice.com, the organization’s consumer-facing website where visitors come to find rice recipes, cooking tips, nutrition information, foodservice resources, and much more. The revamped site has a modern design as well as content and functionality enhancements that both improve the user experience and showcase what makes U.S.-grown rice so special.

“In response to COVID-19, USA Rice adapted its domestic promotion programming to focus more on digital outreach and driving traffic to our consumer website,” said Katie Maher, USA Rice director of strategic initiatives. “The original thinkrice.com launched several years ago, so it was important that we freshen up the site to better support the shift in promotional efforts and ensure that visitors have a positive experience.”


The overhauled site features a streamlined navigation, laying out resources and information so that visitors can find exactly what they need. The site’s top-viewed page, the recipe search, is the first menu item making it easy for people to quickly access the vast database of USA Rice recipes. It features enhanced search and filter capabilities so users can find recipes by keyword or use predefined categories to filter results.

When visitors arrive to the site, the first thing they’ll notice is a stunning video of rice harvest and an invitation to “discover the U.S.-grown rice difference.” Beneath that, viewers see the “Grown in the USA” logo on a bag of rice with the call-to-action to “look for the label” when shopping for rice.

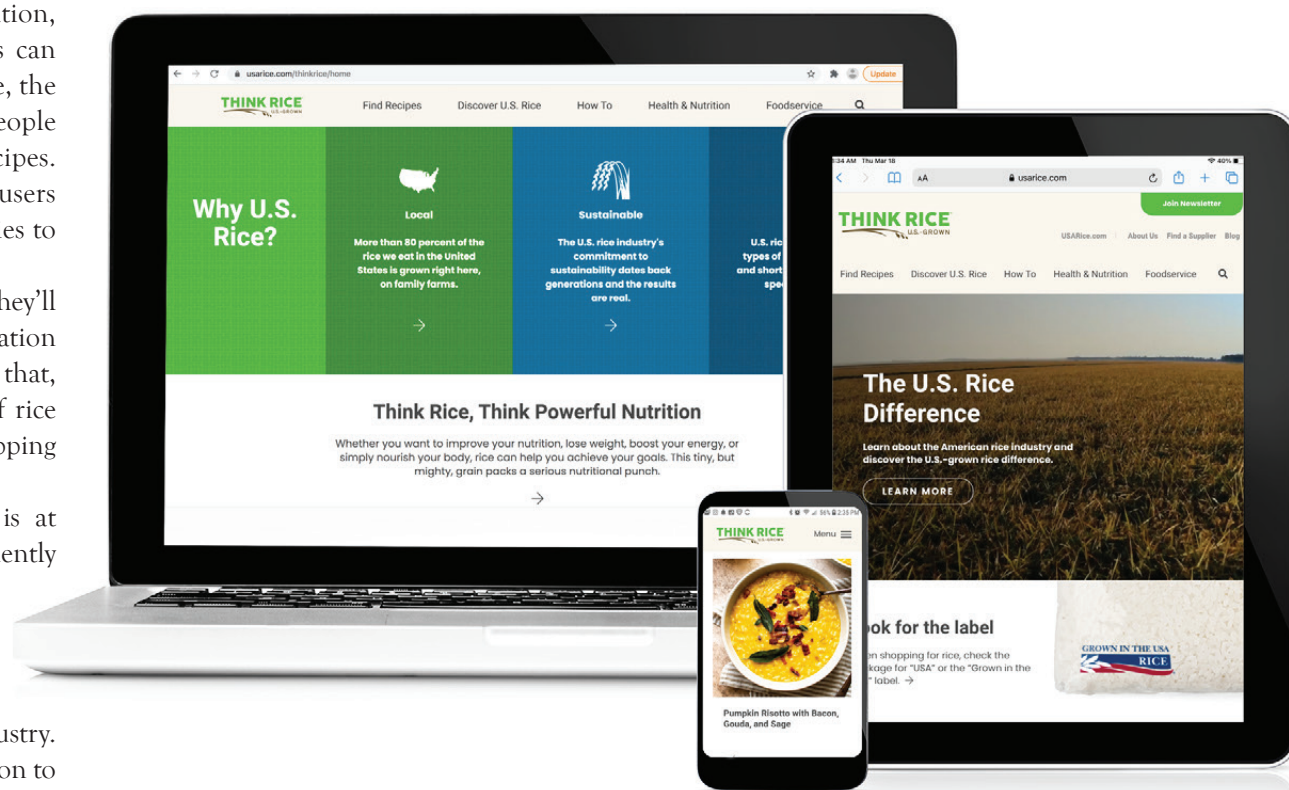
“Encouraging people to choose U.S.-grown rice is at the core of everything we do, so we wanted to prominently feature the ‘Grown in the USA’ logo on the homepage,” said Cameron Jacobs, USA Rice director of domestic promotion. “And the video feature at the top currently directs users to the ‘Discover U.S. Rice’ page which tells the unique story of the rice industry. This feature will be updated periodically to bring attention to different U.S. rice messages.”

Also on the homepage are quick links to popular pages including Meet U.S. Rice Farmers, Sustainability, and U.S. Rice Varieties. There is an eye-catching graphic that highlights key rice nutrition benefits, followed by ‘Rice Cooking 101’ where anyone can learn to make perfect rice by consulting rice cooking tips and methods.

Access to the new USA Rice blog, *The Scoop*, that gives readers the latest “scoop” on rice can be found on the homepage, where featured guests, including chefs and dietitians, share information on food trends, recipe ideas and tips, industry news, and more.

“Having a fresh and modern online presence will certainly resonate with all our audiences from foodservice professionals to nutritionists and consumers,” said Jacobs. “I have no doubt that the latest version of thinkrice.com will provide viewers with a new understanding of U.S.-grown rice and have them thinking rice well after their online visit. You can go to www.usarice.com/thinkrice/ to see for yourself!” 

Deborah Willenborg is the updated website’s biggest fan, and spends way too much time trying to stump the “Find Recipes” feature searching for exotic ingredients to pair with U.S.-grown rice.



“The original thinkrice.com launched several years ago, so it was important that we freshen up the site to better support the shift in promotional efforts and ensure that visitors have a positive experience.”

— KATIE MAHER, USA RICE DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES



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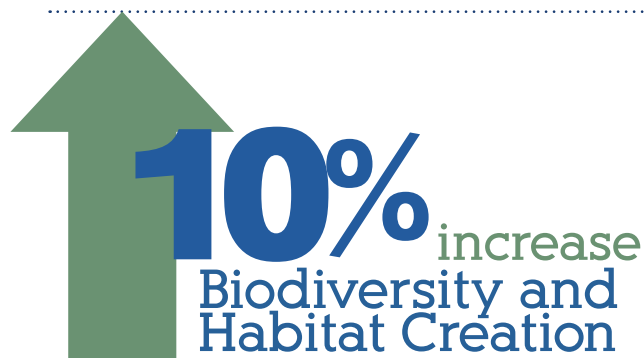
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THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY IS UP TO US

BY LYDIA HOLMES

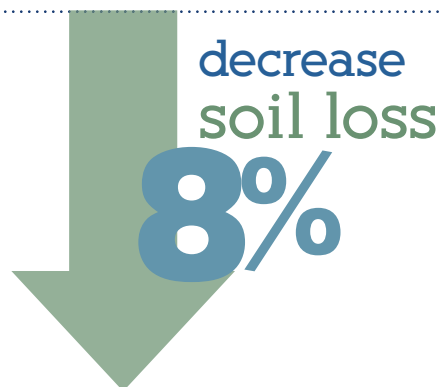


Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- Leaving rice stubble or rough plowed ground after harvest for habitat
- In-season flooding of rice fields
- Over-winter flooding or rainfall capture
- Field reservoirs and tail water recovery systems

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: Michael Bosworth

Along with his family, Michael operates Rue & Forsman Ranch in Rio Oso, California. Michael is committed to local wildlife conservation, adjusting field flooding schedules to create seasonal bird habitat on more than 1,000 acres in the fall, winter, and spring. These acres support more than 200,000 birds representing more than 50 different species. This important habitat often provides unexpected benefits for his rice farming operation, such as when late flood establishment allows weeds to germinate and sprout, helping Michael more easily target them in the field. "I need to farm rice 180 days a year, but I can also have other productive uses for the land the other 180 days," Michael says, describing his holistic approach to farming and wildlife conservation. "It's figuring out how to maximize the benefits of the land year-round."

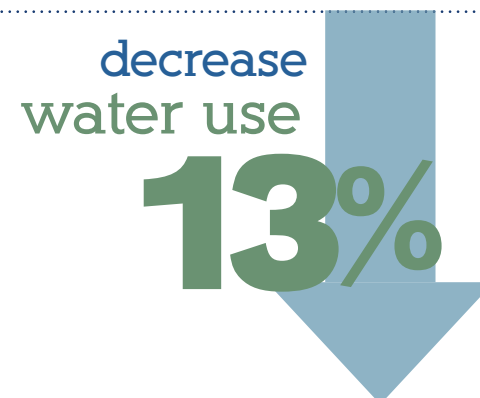


Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- Precision land leveling using laser and GPS technology
- Conservation tillage practices that greatly reduce tillage
- Cover crops
- Furrow irrigated or row rice
- Drainage techniques that minimize soil loss (pipe drops, tailwater recovery, etc.)

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: Christian Richard

Christian Richard is a sixth-generation rice farmer in Kaplan, Louisiana. As he says, "U.S. farmers should be proud to tell the story of how we are being productive while conserving natural resources and maintaining the safest food supply in the world." Christian has integrated beneficial conservation practices throughout his farming operation, including precision leveling and conservation tillage. Practices like these help Christian move water efficiently across his fields and hold the soil in place, minimizing erosion and nutrient loss. These efforts also contribute to visibly clearer water, a good sign that the water quality is improved through Christian's conservation management practices.



Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- Precision land leveling
- Multiple Inlet Rice Irrigation (MIRI)
- Furrow irrigation (Row Rice)
- Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD)
- Water level sensors and pump automation
- Tailwater recovery and surface water reservoirs

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: Scott Matthews

Scott Matthews, a farmer from northwest Arkansas, uses advanced irrigation techniques like Multiple Inlet Rice Irrigation (MIRI) on all his rice acres. "I use MIRI because most of my fields are precision leveled and I'm also in a critical groundwater area, so water efficiency is a necessity." Scott now has close to zero irrigation water runoff from his fields which is a major component of his improved water efficiency. "When you're watering a field and calibrating your pumps, you realize that irrigation is a math problem." This system has enabled him to better capture rainfall for irrigation and flush for chemical purposes without stressing the rice. "In my experience, using MIRI along with PipePlanner is the most efficient way to irrigate and it keeps me from getting behind during the growing season."



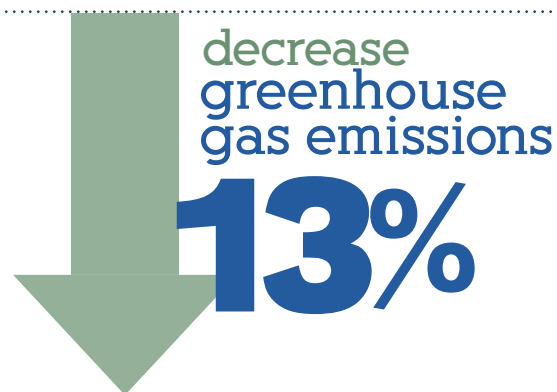
ARLINGTON, VA — The U.S. rice industry is very proud of its sustainability record, and rightly so. Today, we're growing more rice on less land with fewer inputs, all through the innovation of farmers and the rice research and breeding programs. Any industry that wants to take a leadership role in sustainability and conservation is not going to rest on its laurels. And the U.S. rice industry is no exception.

Our industry recently set aggressive new goals on energy and water use, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity, and more. Some will look at these goals and think they sound low: Reducing soil loss by eight percent? That's all? But remember, these goals are on top of the impressive technology and efficiency gains the industry

achieved between 1980 and 2015 that are highlighted in the *U.S. Rice Industry Sustainability Report*.

While these new goals are challenging, they are attainable because they were developed with farmers at the table. Rice farmers know that to ensure a thriving U.S. rice industry for generations to come, they must continue to be good stewards of the land. The 2030 goals are a way to keep the industry accountable as the impressive conservation work continues.

Lydia Holmes is based out of Memphis, Tennessee, and is USA Rice director of sustainability and industry affairs.

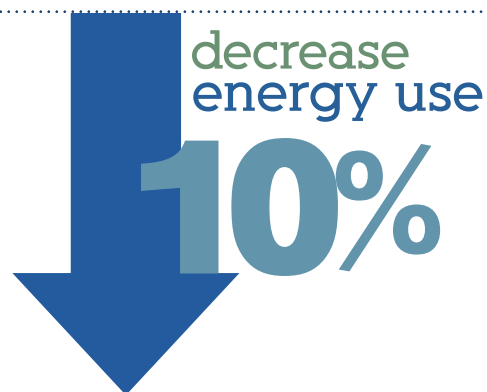


Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD)
- Multiple Inlet Rice Irrigation (MIRI)
- Furrow-irrigated rice (row rice)
- Fertilizer best management practices
- Conversion of diesel pumps to electric or natural gas

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: Jim and Sam Whitaker

Alternate wetting and drying is critical to the successful conservation practices on Jim and Sam Whitaker's operation in Arkansas. Their farm has increased yields while using 60 percent less water than the state average for rice production and reducing their nitrogen use by 20 percent. "Now, we're using less water than soybeans, corn, or cotton. Rice is the most ecologically friendly crop we can plant, if we manage it properly," says Jim. A two-year field study in 2016 revealed water savings of 624,000 gallons per acre. That's an impressive 4.3 billion gallons of total water savings during one growing season. Their system also results in a smaller carbon footprint, reducing methane gas emissions to the atmosphere.



Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- Solar on the farm or at the mill
- Increase in rice hull biofuels
- Phasing out of older equipment for more fuel-efficient models
- Tillage practices and irrigation methods that reduce tractor passes on the field

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: AJ Hood

AJ Hood is a farmer for Tiller & Company in Tiller, Arkansas. The operation includes 625 solar panels plotted on a little over an acre which offset about 75 percent of the electricity needed to dry rice in the six adjacent 30,000-bushel grain storage bins. "We started by looking at the numbers and the more we looked, the more we realized that this is something economically feasible for growers." Federal grants and tax credits reduced the farm's up-front investment, but Hood says the real advantage was making his electric bill more predictable. "It takes a lot to dry rice down, so we typically burn a lot of electricity in that one location," AJ says. The 200-kw solar array is expected to reduce his energy bills by about \$30,000 annually. AJ believes that, "solar is going to be as practical on a farm as a tractor in the next five years."



Practices That Will Help Achieve This Goal

- The U.S. has outstanding rice breeders. Both public and private breeding programs will continue to provide varieties and hybrids with improved yield performance while maintaining the quality standards inherent in the U.S. rice industry.

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: Dr. Adam Famoso

Dr. Adam Famoso is the rice breeder at the Louisiana State University AgCenter H. Rouse Caffey Rice Research Station near Crowley, Louisiana. He is an expert in the use of Marker Assisted Breeding technologies. Adam sees the potential of this technology to advance the industry in the next decade. "Marker Assisted Breeding is primed to revolutionize rice breeding. We can now look at early generation material and eliminate those lines that do not have the desired combination of traits that we are looking for while rapidly advancing those that do. This will allow rice breeders to provide new varieties with continuous yield improvements as well as other traits such as disease resistance which will decrease the use of crop protectant products in the future."



EVERYTHING AND THE CARBON SINK

BY MARK ISBELL

This article is reprinted with permission. It was originally published on www.Agri-Pulse.com, on March 11, 2021, the same day the author testified before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry representing the U.S. rice industry and offering recommendations on sustainability practices and climate mitigation efforts.

LITTLE ROCK, AR — Water was pouring onto the kitchen floor out of the recessed lighting above.

I ran upstairs to see the bathroom sink spilling over, soaking through the flooring and making its way down through the ceiling below. The faucet had been left running – by whom we may never know – though for the kids’ sake we can blame it on our imaginary dog.

Did we grab towels and soak up the overflow?

Of course. But first?

We turned off the faucet.

Climate is about more than just soil health and sequestration

The current conversation surrounding climate and agriculture is a little heavy on the towels and not enough about finding ways to turn off more faucets.

Carbon sequestration – the ability to lock away carbon in the soil through minimizing tillage and increased cover crop adoption – has proven benefits. But emerging climate solutions must value not only greenhouse gases (GHGs) that are sequestered, but must also incentivize new ways of avoiding emissions and remain open to a variety of potential approaches.

My above analogy is imperfect, because it suggests a certain negligence on the part of whoever left the sink running (that darn dog). The opposite is true within production agriculture.

U.S. agriculture has been turning off the faucet for decades

U.S. agriculture has been moving toward greater levels of environmental stewardship for decades.

Since 1980, rice farmers in the United States have decreased greenhouse gas emissions by at least 41 percent for every pound of rice produced while reducing energy use by over 30 percent and cutting water use in half. This is made possible by the ingenuity and stewardship of farmers, innovation by private industry, and the support of the USDA, the Agricultural Research Service, University research programs, and vital government conservation programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

On the ground support is imperative. The Rice Stewardship Partnership, an RCPP-based program, as one example, is bringing together public and private resources, and incentivizing and supporting farmers as they grow in their conservation efforts on over 700,000 acres across rice growing states.

Research is playing a vital role. A multi-year research project by the ARS and the University of Arkansas using high-tech methane measurement tools at my family’s farm has identified practices that can reduce methane production by 60 percent. This is a key step forward in moving rice production to an even higher level of environmental efficiency.

We’ve been sequestering carbon and building soil health too. Minimum tillage and no-till are widely adopted among rice farmers. On our farm we have built organic matter on some fields to higher than 7 percent.

Next-level efficiencies and emerging technologies

Emerging practices and technologies enable even higher levels of efficiency. Row rice irrigation and alternate wetting and drying in rice fields are gaining more adoption and proving effective. Targeted applications of nutrients are ensuring that only what the plants need is applied. And even machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) are playing a role in bringing this all together, helping identify new opportunities and efficiencies never previously thought possible.

But strides toward higher levels of sustainability are not without cost or risk. And reaching these next level efficiencies and ensuring agriculture plays a key role in the climate solutions of tomorrow will require that both private industry and government remain open minded.

Carbon markets could play a role, but they could also prove the Rube-Goldberg machine of climate policy – an overly complex tool to accomplish what could more simply be done through existing programs.



Mark Isbell delivers his testimony before the U.S. Senate Ag Committee from the USA Rice office in Little Rock, Arkansas.

What is certain is this: soil health and carbon sequestration are incredibly important, but they cannot be our only focus.


What is certain is this: soil health and carbon sequestration are incredibly important, but they cannot be our only focus. A myopic approach to climate policy will not only exclude multiple crops and regions, but would also neglect transformative opportunities for creating a diverse portfolio of solutions.

I know that agriculture can play a role in tackling climate change, and I know this because data, science, and experience show me that agriculture already is.

Whatever policy emerges from evolving climate conversations must prioritize the role of existing working lands programs, ensure equitable distribution of value, and ensure that farmers have a strong voice in shaping the policy. Above all, any programs that emerge from new policy must be voluntary.

The consequences of getting this wrong are dire. Imprudent policy could have the unintended consequence of shifting production overseas and away from the well-regulated, predictable, and sustainable supply of domestically produced food. It could also mean lost time, wasted resources, and distorted markets.

But the right approach can build on the successes that farmers have already seen and unleash a new wave of climate solutions we haven’t yet imagined.

For the sake of the better world that I would like to leave my children (the ones that definitely didn’t leave the water running in the upstairs sink), I hope we get this right. 

Mark Isbell is a 4th generation rice farmer from Lonoke County, Arkansas. Mark is a recognized volunteer leader in the rice industry, an active member of USA Rice, and has worked widely on sustainability and climate-change solutions within agriculture. He is a partner in Isbell Farms with his father, mother, cousin, and brother-in-law, and resides in North Little Rock, Arkansas, with his wife, Marda, his son, Sam, and his daughter, Nora.

LET THE SUN SHINE IN

BY LESLEY DIXON

ARLINGTON, VA — On the drive up I-5 in Colusa County, California, along the west side of the Sacramento Valley, the reflective gray-blue surfaces of solar panels slowly track the sun's progress across the sky like sunflowers. Over the last several years they've become a more common sight in agricultural centers like this, not just in California but across the country. Rice farms, mills, and storage and drying facilities are increasingly investing in solar arrays to offset their energy costs and to further their sustainability efforts.

"Obviously any decision that you make has to be a good business decision, but our company's philosophy going back a full generation has been one of sustainability and conservation," said Chris Crutchfield, president and CEO of American Commodity Company. "We understand that as an agricultural industry, we have to be stewards of the land. And in order to do that, we've got to give back more than we take away."

Between two of ACC's facilities in Williams and Willows, 20 miles north, four solar arrays produce more than 1.8 megawatts of electricity, enough to cover the company's entire drying and storage operations and annual energy use at both facilities as well as contribute to some milling and packaging-related power consumption.

But it's not just sun-soaked California that's taking advantage of solar power opportunities. Last month, the first solar field at Poinsett Rice & Grain's Newport, Arkansas, facility came online and is also producing around 800,000 kilowatts. "It's so new we haven't even got the first bill yet," said Randy McNeil, chief operations officer at Poinsett. "But it's definitely going to save. The return on investment on the solar panels is about seven years, and that's when you'll really start seeing your savings."

Like Crutchfield, McNeil saw that the benefits of installing solar panels was two-fold. Not only did it make sense financially, but the environmental benefits were hard to overstate.

"We started thinking about what we could do to be more sustainable," said McNeil. "We don't use much water at all, and so we looked at electricity, and chose to go with solar panels as we're moving forward and always looking for ways to be better stewards of the environment."

Financial incentives from the federal government have encouraged many in the agriculture industry to take the plunge and invest in solar energy in recent years. The Obama Administration offered farmers and other ag businesses 30 percent of their renewable energy project costs up-front, and recently many have taken advantage of tax credits from the U.S. Department of Energy for such projects. While the capital may be harder for smaller operations to come up with, those who have made the leap, like McNeil and Crutchfield, are confident




Even on cloudy, soggy days, Randy McNeil says the solar panels at Poinsett are hard at work.

that it was a good investment and worth it to take advantage of whatever government incentives are available to business owners.

"Smaller operations may not have that capital and borrowing power, so the up-front incentive, even for us, is originally what triggered the go-ahead when we installed the first array back in 2013," said Crutchfield.

Solar panels are proving to be a boon to the rice industry, but they're not going to solve all energy needs overnight. While solar energy is produced right onsite, it must go back into the state's energy grid before it can be utilized. The energy produced by these solar panels is then sold back to the operators at a discounted rate, sometimes through credits. Battery storage onsite is not a practical option, and this means that even though the sun may be shining, farms and facilities still have to contend with issues like the rolling brown-outs that California energy company PG&E enforced throughout 2019's wildfire season.

But ultimately, solar panels and agriculture are a perfect match. The rice industry has the available space, the need for energy, and the passion for bettering the land they live and work on. As the industry becomes more sustainable with each year, we'll be seeing more solar panels soaking up the sun alongside American rice fields.

"I just think it's good we're all looking forward and doing what we can to make it a cleaner Earth, and these are things that we can make happen without much trouble," said McNeil. "It was pretty easy to get involved in this." 

Lesley Dixon is a writer and editor who lives in Austin, Texas, and is glad someone's finally tapping into the power of that sun.

#SUSTAINABILITYSATURDAY

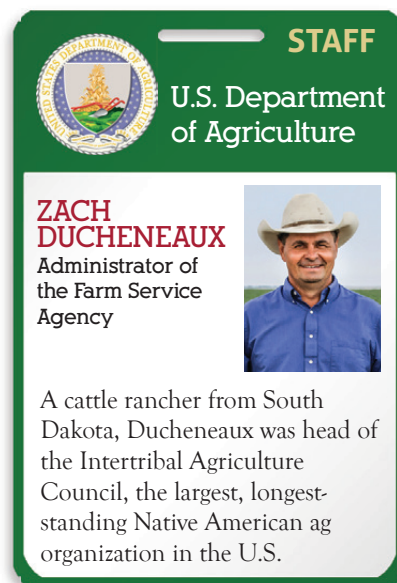
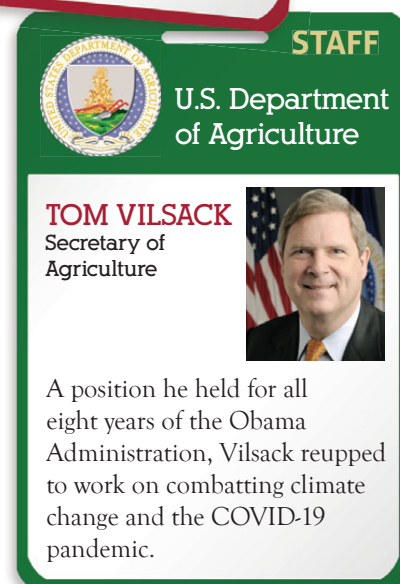
Follow USA Rice on Twitter (@usaricenews and/or @Think_Rice) for a weekly update on U.S. rice industry efforts to lead the world in on-farm production efficiencies, environmental improvements, wildlife preservation, food safety, and more.



LET US SEE YOUR BADGES

BY JAMISON CRUCE

EVERY U.S. PRESIDENT APPOINTS thousands of individuals to positions across the federal government. While President Joe Biden and his team are working on this formidable task, USA Rice has been meeting with key appointees over the past several months to discuss issues pertinent to the rice industry. Here is a look at some key positions important to rice that have been filled at press time — either permanently or on a temporary basis. [WG](#)



117TH CONGRESS IS TIME OF CHANGE

BY JAMISON CRUCE




WASHINGTON, DC — The 117th Congress of the United States is officially well underway with many new faces.

Democrats maintained control of the U.S. House of Representatives, holding a slim margin over Republicans. Of the new House Members, Rep. Troy Nehls (R-TX) replaces now retired Rep. Pete Olson (R-TX) to represent the Houston-area rice-producing 22nd district. Three new Members served in previous Congresses including Rep. David Valadao (R-CA) who represents a rice district in the Central Valley. Tragically and unexpectedly, Rep.-elect Luke Letlow, who was set to fill the seat of now retired Rep. Ralph Abraham (R-LA), passed away five days prior to being sworn-in. A special election was held on March 20 for Louisiana's Fifth Congressional District, which covers the northeast Louisiana rice-producing region, and Julia Letlow won her late husband's seat.

Two new leaders took the helm of the House Committee on Agriculture this Congress with Rep. David Scott (D-GA) assuming the chairmanship and Rep. Glenn 'G.T.' Thompson (R-PA) the ranking member. Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) remains chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and

Related Agencies, and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) remains the ranking member.

In the Senate, Democrats and Republicans hold 50 seats each, but the control goes to the Democrats given Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote. While there are no freshman Senators this Congress from rice-producing states, those re-elected include Bill Cassidy (R-LA), John Cornyn (R-TX), Tom Cotton (R-AR), and Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS). Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) resigned her seat prior to her inauguration as Vice President of the United States on January 20. California Governor Gavin Newsom appointed Alex Padilla, California's secretary of state, to fill the seat through the end of Harris' term, which is set to expire in 2023.

With the Democratic control of the Senate, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry is again chaired by Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI). Sen. John Boozman (R-AR) assumed the lead Republican slot on the committee for this Congress. Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) became chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, while Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND) became ranking member. 

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VIRTUAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS CONFERENCE MAKES IT EASY TO PARTICIPATE

BY JAMISON CRUCE




WASHINGTON, DC — A year to date from the last time USA Rice members and staff met in person, more than 80 USA Rice members from all industry segments participated in the annual USA Rice Government Affairs Conference (GAC).

Members video-conferenced with officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and took part in 17 meetings with key Members of Congress and their staffs, including leaders of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees during the last week of February, advocating on behalf of the rice industry.

“At the time, Tom Vilsack, the new ag secretary, had not yet been confirmed, but we were able to meet with Mae Wu, the new USDA Deputy under secretary of marketing and regulatory programs; Arthur Neal, deputy administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Federal Grain Inspection Service (FGIS); and Andrea Simao, Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) director,” said Bobby Hanks, CEO of Supreme Rice Mill and chair of USA Rice. “We also got the chance to talk with Kevin Norton, who was serving as acting USDA deputy under secretary for Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC). Norton provided an overview of a number of farm production and conservation programs, including updates on the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program and other FPAC priorities under the Biden Administration.”

The virtual meetings focused on coronavirus aid, the farm economy, climate, and trade issues. USA Rice members updated officials and legislators on the importance of farm bill programs and emergency assistance programs, such as the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program and Market Facilitation Program. Members emphasized the need for rice to be at the table during discussions of climate policy, and that climate solutions must not be one size fits all. There also was discussion about the need for an Iraqi rice tender to be issued under the U.S.-Iraq MOU and duty-free access for rice if and when a trade agreement comes to fruition between the U.S. and the United Kingdom.

“We greatly appreciate the folks at USDA and the Members of Congress and staff taking the time to meet with us to ensure the rice industry’s voice is heard in Washington,” said Hanks. “It was encouraging to see so many of our members show industry support and help strengthen relationships with Congress and new personnel in the Biden Administration.” 



SPRING 2021 REGULATORY ISSUES UPDATE

BY DR. JOHN GOLDBERG

Food Safety

Following a February 4, 2021, report of the U.S. House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy titled “Baby Foods Are Tainted with Dangerous Levels of Arsenic, Lead, Cadmium, and Mercury,” the FDA responded with a constituent update and announced new activities aimed at reducing the levels of toxic elements in baby food, including:


- Remind baby food manufacturers of their obligations to implement controls to significantly minimize or prevent any identified chemical hazards requiring a control.
- Make a commitment “in the near term” to review current action levels, as well as develop additional action levels for contaminants in key foods, including finalizing the arsenic in apple juice draft guidance and publishing a draft guidance with action levels for lead in juices.
- Increase sampling of foods for babies and young children.
- Increase inspections and, as appropriate, taking compliance and enforcement actions.
- Hold a workshop “in the coming year” to bring together stakeholders to share knowledge on the variability of toxic element levels in different foods and the potential impacts, if any, of low exposures on childhood development, and discuss potential mitigation strategies.

USA Rice created a task force in July 2020 including members from industry and academia to identify best management practices that can be taken to further mitigate levels of inorganic arsenic in rice and remains in contact with FDA to share research efforts and development of best management tools.

Climate

The new Administration and Congress have prioritized action on climate issues. In the White House, President Biden has appointed former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy to serve as Assistant to the President & White House National Climate Advisor and former Secretary of State John Kerry to serve as U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. Additionally, one of the President’s first executive orders focused on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis. The House and Senate Agriculture Committees have each held a hearing on climate issues and Arkansas rice farmer Mark Isbell served as the USA Rice witness at the Senate hearing. USA Rice has joined the steering committee of the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA), the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Carbon Solutions Task Force, and participates in a number of climate focused coalitions to ensure the rice industry has a voice in policies intended to address climate concerns.

WOTUS

While sitting before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee for his confirmation hearing, EPA Administrator nominee Michael Regan confirmed he would work together with stakeholders to try to strike the right regulatory balance for those in agriculture. Several senators asked Regan how he would approach the rule defining waters of the U.S. (WOTUS) – written under the Obama Administration and the Navigable Waters Protection Rule now on hold released by the Trump Administration. Regan said he would look at EPA’s options to address any kind of lingering concerns, whether that be litigious or concerns with stakeholders, and bring all to the table to understand those concerns. “We do need to move forward to provide certainty to our farming community, especially our small farmers, so decisions can be made, and investments are not stranded on our sidelines,” Regan said. “But I also want to be sure we do that in a way where we are protecting our water quality, our wetlands, and our bays.” 

Dr. John J. Goldberg is the founder of Science Based Strategies, a Washington, DC-based food, agriculture, and environmental policy consulting firm, and a partner at the Normandy Group, LLC. Prior to his move to the private sector, Dr. Goldberg served 22 years as science advisor to the Committee on Agriculture in the U.S. House of Representatives, working on four Farm Bills under seven chairs.

U.S. RICE EXPORTS, AMONG OTHER COMMODITIES, PLAGUED BY COVID-19 SHIPPING WOES

BY JAMISON CRUCE

WASHINGTON, DC — Agricultural transportation disruptions continue to persist on the West Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico due to widespread container and port crew shortages as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is leaving exporters reeling, saddled with the burden of near-record shipping costs and logistical chaos.

U.S. container shortages first started impacting shippers in early 2020, however, over the past several months, the issue has gotten progressively worse. A breadth of agricultural products, including meat, produce, and grain are feeling the negative effects of the backlog on containers, all while detention and demurrage fees, as well as other penalties, rack up.

Because of a generous premium, inbound containers from China are being unloaded and immediately returning to China without being reloaded with U.S. goods for export, leading to container shortages across the country. COVID-19 restrictions and protocols have severely limited the number of port crews to load and unload shipments, hampering what is normally an efficient process.

USA Rice has been engaging with the Federal Government through multiple avenues, including outreach to Capitol Hill and the Biden Administration, and through coalition involvement in Washington. Staff has met with and briefed the Federal Maritime Commission (FMC), along with the DC-based Ag Transportation Working Group, to provide some examples to their Commissioners about the impact container and port crew shortages are having on the rice industry, as well as the agriculture industry as a whole.

The FMC has issued a request for information from ocean carriers and marine terminal operators. Unfortunately, while the call for information is likely to show the carriers and operators that the FMC is serious about the issue, the May deadline for data submission means the issue is likely to persist or get worse over the coming months.

USA Rice provided specific information to educate Congressional offices looking to address the problem. This effort, in addition to a nationwide effort by many facets of the agriculture industry, resulted in a letter from over 140 Members of Congress to the FMC, which included many Members representing rice districts.

“While meat and produce shipping delays risk product spoilage, U.S. rice exports risk expiration of foreign import certificates and missing contract delivery



windows as we heavily rely upon containers to ship to our more than 130 export markets,” said Peter Bachmann, USA Rice vice president of international trade policy. “We need to find a workable solution, but unfortunately this may be a lengthy process, and in the meantime, our exporters should not be penalized for actions by the freight companies and other factors outside their control.”

Bachmann added: “However, we’re not alone in this fight. USA Rice will continue to partner with other industries impacted and various coalitions until a sense of normalcy in the shipping business returns.”

In addition to the Congressional letters sent, USA Rice joined more than 70 agriculture organizations on a letter to President Biden asking for resolve. [WGR](#)

Jamison Cruce is the USA Rice director for government affairs.

“... we’re not alone in this fight. USA Rice will continue to partner with other industries impacted and various coalitions until a sense of normalcy in the shipping business returns.”

— PETER BACHMANN, USA RICE VICE PRESIDENT OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE POLICY



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