

# the AG AGENDA

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## USDA: Celebrating 150 years of Innovation

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President Abraham Lincoln is known for many achievements during his lifetime, but a little known triumph of his – that affects farmers and ranchers greatly – was the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture 150 years ago.

On May 15, 1862, President Lincoln signed into law a bill establishing a new Department of Agriculture, which was specifically directed to acquire information through “practical and scientific experiments” and to collect and propagate “new and valuable seeds and plants” and distribute these to the nation’s agriculturists. It is clear, Lincoln was a man beyond his time.

### A Man with a Vision

Lincoln understood the importance of agriculture to America, and, as importantly, he realized science and technology played a major role in the farming industry. Without a doubt, I believe Lincoln today would embrace the many technological advancements farmers use on their farms, including biotechnology.

Lincoln once wrote: “Every blade of grass is a study, and to produce two, where there was but one, is both a profit and a pleasure. And not grass alone, but soils, seeds and seasons – hedges, ditches and fences, draining, droughts and irrigation – plowing, hoeing and harrowing – reaping, mowing and threshing – saving crops, pests of crops, diseases of crops and what will prevent or cure them ... the thousand things of which these are specimens – each a world of study within itself.”

The federal government was, from the beginning of its involvement in agriculture, dedicated to scientific progress in farming. This commitment continues today and is shared by farmers and ranchers across the country, regardless of the methods of food and fiber production they use – organic, conventional or biotechnology. They all need science.

### Full Speed Ahead

The importance of science and innovation – biotechnology in particular – to agriculture will be significant as we face several challenges in the years ahead. The world’s population just passed the 7 billion mark. According to the World Food Program, the best estimate is that 1 billion people (one in seven) are hungry and food insecure. By 2050 the world’s population will rise to 9 billion people. This means we must double world food production by 2050 in order to meet this challenge.

Further, we must accomplish this hefty goal while realizing that our Earth is fragile. To take care of our environment, we must embrace agriculture research, science, innovation and biotechnology.



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When it comes to medical care, communication and transportation we accept the importance of innovation. We need to do the same when it comes to the production of food.

Earlier this year, the United Nations issued a special report recognizing that “new ‘green’ biotechnologies can...improve resistance to pests, restore soil fertility and contribute to the diversification of the rural economy.” Sound familiar? Seems a lot like what Lincoln described as a goal 150 years ago.

Scientists have developed new seeds that can improve yields while resisting disease and requiring less water. That is critical as 70 percent of all fresh water is used by agriculture. American consumers and consumers all over the world can feel safe with this technology and confident it will improve our environment.

While meeting these quantitative challenges and meeting our environmental goals, we will strive to focus even greater attention on the qualitative side, to also meet the needs of consumers who express a preference for foods grown “their way.” Science is the answer for all these missions, and today’s USDA is helping to blaze that trail.

So, Happy Birthday USDA and best wishes as we continue down the road for another 150 years. America’s farmers, ranchers and research scientists can lead the way to a new 21st century Green Revolution if we follow the vision of Abraham Lincoln. As Honest Abe said, “Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today.”