FEDERAL FUNDING FOR GRAND FARMS RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC/PRIVATE RESEARCH

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I thought that Grand Farms, once it had exhausted its first tranche of cash from both federal and state government, might just wither away from lack of sustenance. Despite original assurances that corporate agriculture industries would continue their support of Grand Farms, its lifeline has always been government subsidies.Now it appears that the federal government is again sinking millionsinto this project.

Unfortunately, the major beneficiaries will not be small and medium sized farm operations but rather larger, industrial farm operations that adopt the technologies derived from the research and the industrial agriculture corporations that will profit from commercialization of this publicly-funded research. Under present agricultural conditions, largely caused by the Trump administration's misguided tariffs that have resulted in loss of agricultural export markets and increased input costs and Trump's unlawful "war of choice" against Iran that has resulted in higher prices and shortages for fuel and fertilizer, even large scale farmers are experiencing financial distress and are unlikely to adopt whatever new technologies are derived from this recent infusion of federal funds.

I discussed Grand Farm's focus on precision agriculture in "Two Contrasting Visions of Agriculture" in this publication on December 2, 2024.The research conducted by these public/private ventures, such as Grand Farms, raises possible negative consequences for the research process, research institutions and the adopters of this research. William Lacy, the prolific scholar on the impacts of new agricultural technologies, wrote about the positive and negative impacts of these kinds of ventures in the early 2000s. Among the negative consequences are:

Short term proprietary interests of the private sector research would take precedence over the long term public interests of university-based research.

Collaborations could affect academic freedom for faculty, create conflicts of interest, generate pressure for short-term research and disrupt long-term basic research missions.

Research projects usually originated by faculty members would be replaced by projects originated as the result of implicit or explicit external pressures resulting in de-emphasizing a whole range of research agendas traditionally the purview of the university community.

Patents, licensing and material transfer agreements about ownership of products of such research would impede, limit the pace, affect the direction, restrict the communication of scientific research and undermine an academic scientist's ability to carry out research.

Companies supporting research at these public/private collaborations, such as Grand Farms, may ask scientists to go beyond the standard secrecy requirements needed to obtain patents for products related to their research.

Research-related corporate gifts often come with restrictions including the donor's right to review all publications, restrictions on sharing research materials or results with colleagues, and ownership of all patentable results.

A consequence of the increase in patenting by both the corporate sector and universities has been an increase in legal confrontations between universities and corporate donors over disputes about patent infringement.

The potential of conflict of interests or allegations of scientific misconduct may arise in these private-public research collaborations especially over the detrimental effects of restrictive agreements between universities and corporate donors.

Published journal research from these private/public collaborations does not disclose that the authors had a financial interest connected to the research. Although scientists do not believe that they are influenced by their financial ties, the pressures may be too subtle for them to realize.

The uneven distribution of benefits of the adoption of agricultural research — whether from public/private ventures such as Grand Farms, or land grant university- based research — was noted in the report from the National Research Council in 2002. The conclusions of that research summary included:

The commodity and production orientations of public (and public/private) sector agricultural research have contributed to concentration in production agriculture. The amount of and rate of change in publicly-financed agricultural research and development are correlated with increases in average farm size, with the number of very large farms (1,000+ acres), with large farms as a percentage of all farms, with livestock specialization and with farmers' off-farm work participation. The research being conducted at Grand Farms will continue this concentration in production agriculture.

The adoption of public (and public/private) sector agricultural research is not always scale neutral, resulting in different groups adopting research results at different rates. The unequal rate of adoption is due to differences in farm size and land quality and the operators' age, wealth, education, access to credit and human capital resources. Because larger operators have access to adequate human resources and financial capital, they are more likely to adopt new agricultural technologies, compared to smaller operators who may take more time to adopt them. Consequently, public (and public/ private) sector research, through developing new technologies, introduces change throughout the agricultural system benefiting larger farmers. Small and mid-sized operators often find it difficult to compete with larger operators considering the perceived risk, fixed costs and credit constraints of adopting new technology. The research conducted at Grand Farms does not appear to be scale neutral, and appears to be oriented to large scale, industrial agricultural production.

How (and who) transfers the technology affects the structure of agriculture. As the technology transfer arm of the public sector, Cooperative Extension connects research and the structure of agriculture. Communicating research results to farmers and other citizens through adult education is a major

function of the extension service. What is communicated, to whom, and how it is communicated affects agricultural structure. Research indicates that extension works disproportionately with some groups dependent upon the race and gender of the operator, the size of the farm and the type of agriculture. From the news reporting of the awarding of federal grants to Grand Farms, how and to whom the results of that research will be communicated to potential adopters is not indicated.

Publicly funded agricultural research can promote the public good. Increasing evidence indicates that land grant universities are beginning to shift their focus to a broader research agenda that supports the production of public goods rather than increased agricultural productivity. This research can promote the production of public goods from which profit cannot be captured. These public goods include sustainable/regenerative agriculture, resource conservation, and rural development — goods that are relevant to small and medium sized farms and organic farmers. Unfortunately, this is not the kind of research being conducted at Grand Farms and too little state agricultural research and extension funds have been allocated by the State Board of Agricultural Research to these public goods.

Distributional inequities should be a priority of an integrated policy for publicly funded agricultural research and extension. It's not likely that a change in priorities in research and extension policy, however, would completely offset or neutralize distributional inequities considering that other forces also encourage structural change in agriculture. While publicly funded research can ensure the development of new research, technology and delivery mechanisms beneficial to large scale industrial production agriculture, it should also encourage broad access to the research results for small and medium sized operations and secure multi-stakeholder participation in the research effort. Unfortunately, there is no indication in the news articles that Grand Farms has considered broad access to the results of the research and multi-stakeholder participation beyond that of large scale, industrial agricultural production. If Grand Farms is to enjoy broad based public support, it will have to acknowledge and address distributional issues

and target underserved populations that often are overlooked by public/private-sector collaborative research and development.

The report from the National Research Council offers specific recommendations for public-sector research that should also apply to public/private collaborative research such as Grand Farms. Given the economic and technological determinism that drives Grand Farms (see "Two Contrasting Visions of Agriculture") however, I doubt that such recommendations would be given much consideration:

Research goals should be broadened beyond productivity and efficiency to improve technology and information delivery that benefit farmers in varied production systems and conditions, including part-time farmers, small scale farmers, organic farmers and value-added producers. Limiting public-sector research to scale-neutral technologies, however, is insufficient to meet the needs of varied producer stakeholders. Land grant universities should assess the opportunities for research and extension for those who are not served by private sector research.

The public (and public/private) research sector should use an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from biophysical science, social science and humanities to determine structural consequences of publicly-funded research and to assess the research needs of a variety of stakeholders. Land grant universities should strengthen social science expertise in the areas of setting research priorities and assessing the distributional impacts of agricultural research and new technology.

To improve accountability of publicly funded research institutions to diverse constituencies, federal and state governments should incorporate the knowledge and needs of varied stakeholders through authentic public participation in setting priorities and in implementing publicly funded research projects. They should also encourage broad-based participation on research and extension advisory boards (such as the State Board of Agricultural Research and Education) to determine the applicability and significance of proposed research and extension programs and to ascertain whether priority setting is responsive to the needs of diverse stakeholders,

especially those that cannot be met by private sector. They should also critically analyze methods used to engage, interpret and incorporate stakeholder input into decision making — and take action to make the participation process more understandable and transparent to the public.

Federal and state public sector research institutions should develop expertise and research programs devoted to analyzing the distributional consequences and effects of agricultural research and development for varied groups of producers, using both pre- and post-research designs.

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