

Coastal Grower
The McCloy Fellowship
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In spring of 2009 the American Council on Germany announced its class of McCloy Fellows. This program selects four American Agriculturalists from throughout the United States based on a proven commitment to the field of agriculture to spend a month in Germany. I was lucky enough to be one of the four selected. Established over thirty years ago, fellows are given the opportunity to explore agricultural research, policy and techniques. The purpose of this article is to capture some of the observations; with specific attention given to trends on agriculture, politics and society.

Many do not realize that Germany is the world's third largest economy. For an area less than the size of Montana, it boasts over eighty million people that are well trained, hard working and heavily invested in technology. More than thirty percent of the country's economy is based on exports, making it the world's leading exporter. Near fifty percent of the automobiles manufactured in Germany are exported. Fifteen percent of the world's chemicals are manufactured in Germany. The statistics go on and on. As in the United States, agriculture is a key part of the German Economic machine. When it comes down to it, agriculture is near twenty percent of the country's GDP. Its largest exports include pork and milk. In fact, when it comes to Europe, Germany produces nearly forty percent of the entire European Union's milk.

The 2009 McCloy Fellowship brought together producers from Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and California. Visits were set up with various agricultural stakeholders in seven states throughout Germany. The fellowship included a visit to Berlin and a wide variety of agricultural operations throughout Germany. It also included several days in Brussels with representatives of the European Union, European Trade Associations and even some Belgian farmers. As diverse as the country itself, German agriculture faces a wide variety of issues, challenges and opportunities.

Some of the most powerful observations made during the fellowship were tied to politics. The fellowship took place during Germany's National Elections. The elections coupled with the recent election of Barack Obama in the United States, provided grounds for some very exciting discussions. Germans hold a favorable opinion of the United States and an extremely favorable opinion of Barack Obama. As of September, 2009, President Barack Obama enjoyed a nearly eighty percent approval rating in Germany.

Closer observation revealed that many Germans await "change" on a global political landscape thanks to President Obama's election. The interest in Obama is actually more motivated by a distaste for Former President George W. Bush and the Republican Party as a whole. While the United States had elected a conservative party into the Presidency, most of Europe was dominated by more liberal governments at the same time. As one American Diplomat in Germany shared, "European and German elected officials alike had a difficult time relating to the conservative politics during the Bush Presidency."

Differences of politics between the U.S. and Germany have had a negative impact on a great many issues of importance to American Agriculture. The most important of which is trade. One agricultural trade representative to the European Union explained it best by stating, “more progress had been made in American Agricultural Policy in Europe in nine months following the inauguration of President Barack Obama than in the last five years.”

German farmers (and quite a few Germans) actually have more in common with American “Republican” politics, then they want to admit. German Farmers favor less bureaucracy, lower taxes and less regulation. After all, Germans elected conservative leader, Angela Merkel to five more years in the presidency. Her conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) won a growing majority of the votes as well.

The Green Party in Germany was the greatest source of fascinating political discussion. Now numbering near ten percent of registered voters, the Green Party had the best organized and most successful messaging of all campaigns this last election. One hundred percent of there messages were based on political ideas, not people.

The real birth of the Green Party in Germany actually has roots in agriculture thanks to consumer distrust brought about by BSE (Mad Cow Disease) in Germany in the late Nineties. The Green Party seized the opportunity to build support for a safer food supply. They condemned “factory farming” and took center stage on agricultural issues. As a result of the fiasco, huge changes in political power took place and Green Party Leadership was appointed to influential positions at both the state and federal level. The Green Party’s Frau Kunast was appointed Agricultural Minister. Almost overnight, agriculture faced an enemy in the Federal Government that had no farming experience. She instituted new regulations and fought tirelessly to convince the German public of the evils of things like bio-tech, climate change and pesticides affecting the food supply. The power given to the “Greens” was short, however the impact on farm policy is still felt today.

The Green Party has also had a tremendous impact on energy policy. Huge government incentives in energy policy have placed Germany near the top of green energy production in the world. Almost everywhere in Germany you can see wind energy generation taking place. Manufacturing and jobs in the green energy sector number in the hundreds of thousands. It’s a fact, one in three windmills in the world are manufactured in Germany. One in every two windmills in Europe comes from Germany. Wind power contributes to near nine percent of Germany’s power demands and growing. Solar power is also a force. Solar panels can be found throughout the county. Many of these panels are found on the roofs of agricultural operations.

The growing rage in “green” German Agriculture these days is actually bio-fuel. Nearly five thousand bio fuel plants exist in Germany today. This number is growing at a rate of near fifteen percent annually. We visited several plants using surplus grain, green waste and manures from livestock operations. In almost every case, government financing and

guaranteed payments were what made investment so attractive. These investments have led to a German boom in alternative energy engineering and technology.

As in the United States, Germans generally trust and love farmers. This appreciation leads to a whole different idea of private property rights. In some areas, farms are regarded as parks. Trespassing laws are weak and as a result, the public often gains admission to farms without permission. There are several places where benches and gardens are created on public and private property adjacent to farming operations.

This encouraged a large number of folks that walked, ran or had family picnics on or near private agricultural land. While, it appeared to be in balance, liability and / or food safety concerns among trade organizations are real. Recent European Union legislation actually seeks to compensate farmers for providing “open space and public view sheds.” Direct payment programs are being shifted from commodity specific values to a simple payment of two hundred Euro per hectare.

The love for farmers extends deeper as a love for food. Germans place great value on local, fresh agricultural commodities purchased with greater frequency than in the United States. Meals are much more important as they last longer and are prepared at home more frequently than in the United States as well. The direct marketing of agricultural goods in Germany is simply better supported and more advanced than anywhere in the United States

Germany has an extremely rich history dating back more than one thousand years. While the separation between the German producer and the consumer is greater than it ever was, there is great opportunity in this challenge. Locally produced farm products and family time spent around preparing and enjoying food is still alive and well in Germany.

The McCloy Fellowship awakens in its participants the need for farmers around the globe to embrace our shared challenges and come together to learn from one another. With the right thoughts, research, and coming together as one, farmers stand the chance to partner with consumers in ways never thought possible. In the face of some of the greatest political and regulatory challenges across Europe and the United States, I feel farmers are not only ready to succeed, however already creating the path to do so.