

Grain success parallels Turkey's leadership claim

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by Morton Sosland

Within the world of grain, attitudes of industry participants vary as broadly as the ranges of weather, yields and demand that make for differences between countries and even within nations. And while it is true that success with production and marketing often spurs positive feelings among farmers, marketers and processors serving diverse needs, few examples come to mind where grain is a source of national pride, where a country's achievements in grain contribute to economic vitality. It so happens that a journey in the past year accompanied by an interview in the middle of America of a leading agricultural official prompted the conclusion that Turkey may be cited as the country where what has happened in grain accounts for its assertion of leadership among its neighboring Muslim nations.

Turkey stands out among the nations in the Middle East for how its grain production has given it strength to assume political and economic dominance. From a time when a large part of its domestic supplies were imported to the present when Turkey is growing sufficient grain to meet domestic needs and also to supply exports represents an impressive accomplishment in a world of frequent crop disappointments. This achievement is due in large part to the embrace by Turkey of modern agricultural production, most especially in using its water resources. Much of its grain, as well as corn, pulses and sugar beets are grown in irrigated fields that efficiently utilize water to produce in areas that are at relatively high elevations. Rotation practices have been adopted that assure sustainability at a level that is the envy of agricultural producers in developed nations.

While Turkey's pride with its grain growing primarily reflects its priority to domestic food security, it is difficult to overlook the nation's history in the development of global grain production. It was in Turkey some 9,000 years ago that grain crops, probably wheat, were first domesticated, giving farmers in that nation considerable self-respect. That the wheat introduced in the American Plains in the 19th century was known as Turkey hard red winter wheat only accentuates for the people of that country its centrality in evolution of the grain economy.

Turkey's embrace of modern agriculture has not extended to genetically modified crops. The leaders of the country's agriculture are attracted by what GMO's might offer in the way of increased yields and resistance to insects and unfavorable growing conditions. But they reflect the questions heard in other Muslim countries about the effect of this branch of modern agriculture on health. It is comforting to know that Turkey wants the U.S. government to conduct extensive research aimed at answering these questions, and if the findings are favorable, confidence is voiced about global acceptance of this technology.

National emphasis on food security is not forgotten when it comes to exports of both wheat and flour that are supplied primarily to neighboring nations. Indeed, the main destination for these exports has been Iraq, where domestic production has dropped in the wake of the prolonged war and strife that have besieged that nation. Meeting the food needs of fellow

Muslims in Iraq as well as in other nearby nations hurt by 2010 Russia's export ban has been encouraged by the government.

"If you look at all the issues that are of importance to the world today, they have put Turkey in a rather more advantageous position," Abdullah Gul, president of Turkey, said in an address last fall to the United Nations.

Grain did not specifically win mention in this address, but anyone aware of how Turkey has been boosted by its grain success is well aware that its leadership claims stem as much from this as anything else.

"Turkey used to be known as the sick man of Europe, whereas Turkey now is the only healthy man of Europe," Mr. Gul asserted.

In many ways, food security due to grain made this amazing transformation happen.