



NATIONAL COALITION FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

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Robotic Weed Wars

A New Game, New Players and New Rules

Washington, DC—May 17, 2017, for Immediate Release – Research on robotic weeders to assist vegetable and other specialty crop growers in controlling weeds will be the subject of NCFAR’s seminar on Monday, May 22, at noon in 1302 Longworth House Office Building. The presenter is Dr. Steven Fennimore, a cooperative extension specialist and weed scientist at the University of California at Davis.

“Automated robotic weeders are a fledgling industry being driven by a shortage in hand labor and a lack of suitable herbicides for specialty crops” says Dr. Fennimore. Public investment in agricultural research and engineering can help spur the technological innovations and train the workforce needed to maintain an affordable 21st food supply.

“This presentation provides an excellent example of the value of federally funded food and agricultural research, extension, and education in producing the scientific outcomes and outreach needed to meet 21st century challenges and opportunities,” says Andy LaVigne, President of the National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (National C-FAR).

Highlights: U.S. vegetable growers are mainly dependent on hand weeding to achieve acceptable weed control since there are relatively few herbicides registered for use in these small acreage crops due to the nearly \$300 million cost of researching, developing, and testing a new herbicide that would meet today’s regulatory requirements. Labor shortages have led to higher hand-weeding costs that run \$150 to \$300 per acre, thus vegetable growers have begun to adopt automated robotic weeders. Machine vision technology, together with data processors, have been developed to enable commercial machines to recognize crop row patterns and control automated devices that perform tasks such as removal of intra-row weeds, as well as to thin crops to desired stands. However, it is doubtful that private funding alone from small startup companies will be adequate to develop automated robotic weeders custom-designed for U.S. crops. Public funding is needed to help train students in the multidisciplinary fields of science, technology, and engineering needed to advance the development of automated robotic weeders. Research is needed on more challenging precision weed control technologies, such as lasers or sand abrasives to remove weeds. These public investments would be a win-win for everyone as it generates higher paying jobs in the crop protection industry, leads to the use of lower risk weed control tactics, and maintains a safe and affordable supply of U.S. vegetables.

The seminar is open to the public and the media.

The **National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research (National C-FAR)** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, consensus-based, and *customer-led* coalition that brings food, agriculture, nutrition, conservation, and natural resource stakeholders together with the food and agriculture research and Extension community, serving as a forum and a unified voice in support of sustaining and increasing public investment at the national level in food and agricultural research, Extension, and education. National C-FAR’s Hill Seminar Series, now in its tenth year, regularly presents leading-edge researchers working to provide answers to pressing issues confronting the public and Congress. The Hill Seminar Series helps demonstrate the value of public investment in food and agricultural research—investment that returns 45 percent per year on average, and \$20 in economic benefit from every \$1 investment in food and ag research.

Go to http://www.ncfar.org/Hill_Seminar_Series.asp for more information about the seminar series and past topics. Interviews with National C-FAR President Andy LaVigne are available by request. For additional information, go to www.ncfar.org; or contact Tom Van Arsdall, Executive Director, at tom@vanarsdall.com or (703) 509-4746.