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INTSORMIL Helps Improve Varieties of Grains in Developing Countries

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The Leading

*The Morrill Act of 1862
established a Land Grant University
in each state where
The Leading Object
would be instruction
in agriculture and related fields.*

Object

March 2010

INTSORMIL helps improve varieties of grains in developing countries

International efforts to aid food production in developing countries are based within the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

The International Sorghum and Millet Collaborative Research Support Program (INTSORMIL CRSP) was established at UNL's East Campus in 1979. Its goal is to improve the development of sorghum, millet, and other grains in Central America and Africa, said John Yohe, director since 1988.

"We're making a tremendous contribution to humanity," said Yohe, who is responsible for coordinating the multi-disciplinary program.

Before the assistance of INTSORMIL scientists, grain production in developing countries was from landrace, or native, varieties and plagued with diseases and pests. INTSORMIL has helped improve grain varieties to resist pests such as striga, a parasitic weed, Yohe said.

INTSORMIL was created by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to solve food and nutrition problems in developing countries through land-grant university expertise. Eight U.S. universities, including UNL, were competitively identified and became participants in the new program. UNL became the management entity and headquarters.

Yohe, who had previous international agricultural experience in South Korea and Brazil, worked for USAID in Washington, D.C., from 1977 to 1984. He moved to INTSORMIL in 1984, becoming director a few years later.



Women near Mopti, Mali, take harvested pearl millet heads to the village for threshing.

Photo by E.A. Heinrichs

INTSORMIL has had several accomplishments since 1979, such as helping developing countries grow sorghum free of tannin — a chemical that interferes with digestibility. Other successes have included helping countries lower the cost of producing food and making their grains more resistant to aflatoxin molds.

In Tanzania, for example, INTSORMIL has helped women support their families by selling bread made with sorghum flour.

Currently working with UNL are scientists from Kansas State University, Texas A&M and West Texas A&M universities, The Ohio State University, Purdue University, and a pearl millet breeder from
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INTSORMIL *(continued from page 1)*

the USDA Agricultural Research Service.

As a result of INTSORMIL, about 1,500 students from developing countries have attended UNL and partnering institutions since 1979, taking back to their home countries valuable information on food production, Yohe said.

INTSORMIL had been grant-funded until 2006, when USAID started a new five-year, \$9.6 million funding program for the organization under a cooperative agreement funding arrangement. That figure has since been raised to \$12.6 million for the period of Oct. 1, 2006, to Sept. 30, 2011.

“I can honestly say in 25 years I’ve never had a day where I dreaded coming to work,” Yohe said. “I work with a wonderful core group of scientists and staff. It’s a joy.”

— *Lori McGinnis*