

## **Perspectives: Responsible Science -- In the Public Interest**

**Dr. James L. Oblinger**

North Carolina is fortunate to enjoy a quality of life that makes it one of the fastest growing states in the nation. With that growth has come change -- and challenge. As farm land is converted to other uses, farmers in North Carolina, as in other states, must produce food for more people on less land. Meanwhile, runoff from factories, cities, and farms threatens the quality of our groundwater, our rivers, our lakes, our estuaries.

To confront such challenges effectively, North Carolina State University and its College of Agriculture and Life Sciences have provided sound leadership, education, and science on the university campus in Raleigh, as well as on research farms, in industrial settings, and in Cooperative Extension centers in all 100 counties and on the Cherokee Reservation.

We are committed to finding solutions to the problems faced by North Carolinians, both rural and urban, and to discovering and sharing knowledge and new technology that is relevant and responsive to the needs of our citizens. We conduct science for the sake of people, not just for the sake of science -- in the best interest of all. Because of this service, we feel we have earned the public's trust. We do not take that trust lightly.

We are also committed to objectivity. Because objectivity is the cornerstone of science, our scientists are diligent about having their findings reviewed by fellow experts to ensure that they are sound and unbiased. This peer-review process is particularly important in a public institution like the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. While we are extraordinarily careful to maintain our objectivity, the very nature of scientific inquiry sometimes produces results that, without deep analysis, may appear contradictory.

This has sometimes been the case during the heated debate over the best methods to deal with swine waste. For example, our research has shown that some fraction of older lagoons that farmers use to treat swine waste can sometimes pose an environmental threat to groundwater. And yet, our research also has shown that when properly managed, the lagoon/spray field method of treating waste can be environmentally and economically sound.

Economics is an extraordinarily important part of the equation if we are to fulfill our mandate of conducting science in the public interest. If we do not consider the cost to the farmer of proposed waste management techniques, we are not doing our job. Yet, we must also consider the effect of the waste management methods on the environment, because the environmental and economic aspects of agriculture have always been inextricably intertwined. Farmers were the original stewards of the land, and as they adopt new agricultural practices they need to ensure the environmental quality upon which they depend. Likewise, consumers need a clean environment, and they also rely on our country's abundant, safe, inexpensive food supply and benefit from the dollars that agriculture brings into the state's economy. Agribusiness is, after all, North Carolina's number one industry. Food, fiber, and forestry account for more than one-fifth of the state's income and employees.

A mutual understanding of common concerns -- and common challenges -- is critical when it comes to the swine industry, which is now our state's leading agricultural endeavor. The effort within N.C. State's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences to address these concerns is unparalleled by any other institution. We are a national leader in waste management research. Through our Animal and Poultry Waste Management Center, scientists from various disciplines are developing and evaluating waste treatment technologies that will protect air, soil, and water quality, and support our state's important animal agriculture industry. We are also working with researchers from other universities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service, and the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to develop more effective methods of dealing with the wastes generated by animal agriculture.

We remain committed to finding viable solutions and recognize that objective scientific inquiry often produces the best available solution. In the case of the problems facing the swine industry, our scientists are making excellent progress to develop the waste management technologies that are both inexpensive and entirely benign to the environment.

Like other research in key areas of public concern, our swine waste research will give policy makers -- indeed, all citizens -- the information they need to make difficult decisions that will simultaneously support the economic needs of farmers and address the necessity of protecting our environment for the greatest benefit of all North Carolinians.

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