



U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards Praises Ag Research at Texas A&M, Tours Labs

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COLLEGE STATION – U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards of Waco on Wednesday praised the agricultural research accomplishments of the Texas A&M System, then toured some campus labs to get a first-hand look at efforts aimed at world solutions to food and energy needs.

"I feel like the water boy who is finally getting to meet the football players," Edwards told a crowd of 60 researchers and administrators. "You are the real stars ... accomplishing great things."

People tend to think that if they aren't farmers or ranchers, that agricultural research has no relevance for them, he said, but that's not true.

On his tour, Edwards met with Dr. Keerti Rathore, an AgriLife Research plant biotechnologist, whose ground-breaking work on removing a toxic compound from cottonseed could make it a high-protein food available to an estimated 500 million people a year.

He also was shown 20-foot tall sorghum stalks that show great potential as high-tonnage biomass for the production of cellulosic ethanol. The sorghum stalks, which resemble bamboo canes, could be grown throughout much of the South and produce an estimated 20 dry tons per acre, according to AgriLife researcher Dr. John Mullet.

Such high yields, Mullet explained, mean that 2,000 gallons of ethanol, instead of 500 gallons, could be produced per acre.

Edwards said as he visits with constituents in his 17th Congressional district, which runs from Cleburne south through Waco and Navasota, the issues people are most concerned about – high food prices, high fuel prices and health care, for example – are the very issues that Texas AgriLife Research scientists are working on.

As high as food prices seem, Edwards said, the truth is that Americans pay less for food as a percentage of income than any other people in the world. Without the long history of agricultural research in partnership with farmers and ranchers, he said, he couldn't imagine how high food prices would be – "double, triple, who knows?"

AgriLife researchers are also working on a wide array of alternative fuels, from algae to sorghum, he said, "to find new sources of renewable clean energy that in the long run can bring down the price of gasoline and energy."

Edwards also praised the work of the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center at Texas A&M, which is working to develop more healthful foods that will help people fight diseases or prevent them altogether, thus lowering health care costs. Referring to his water boy analogy, the congressman said he felt privileged to play a small part in helping bring the "water" – some \$23 million in federal funds for agriculture and energy research at the Texas A&M System in 2007.

But Edwards also pointed out that all of this funding came from "earmarked" legislation, which directs funding to a

particular project in a Congressional district, a practice that has been criticized as wasteful. He said there's a positive side to a story that has been portrayed negatively nationally. "We shouldn't let the one bad (earmarked) project overshadow the 99 others that are making our quality of life better, our economy stronger and our nation safer."

"If we were to end all Congressional earmarks," he warned, "if that became the policy, it would devastate our AgriLife research here at Texas A&M, our engineering programs and some of our nation's defense programs that are so important to the military."

"So these are earmarks that I am very proud to be associated with," he continued, "and I didn't come up with these. Many of them came from here (at Texas A&M), from some of the world's finest researchers."

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