MERLE JENSEN

UA scientists and Arizona growers visited the CIANO Research Station in Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, in the spring of 1990 as part of a joint project to help growers on both sides of the United States/Mexico border. (Left to right) Jesus Martinez, CIANO research director; Ernesto Samayoa, director general of agricultural research (INIFAP) in Mexico; Eugene Sander, dean of the UA College of Agriculture; and Ron Rayner, president of the Arizona Cotton Growers Association.

Mexico is a Partner, Not a Competitor

BY JESSICA BELL

Without Mexican produce, many Americans would be faced with some dull meals come winter.

The Sonoran Plateau portion of Mexico exports 3.3 billion pounds of vegetables into the United States each year, the majority during the winter months. They come mostly by truck into Arizona, California and Texas border towns where they are sold and shipped throughout the rest of North America. Last year, more than 1 billion pounds of vegetables came into the country through Nogales, Ariz., alone.

On the other side of the border, in Arizona, this same plateau has become the winter lettuce capital of the United States. The region also is a major producer of citrus and melons, and grows more than 450,000 acres of cotton each year.

University of Arizona and Mexican scientists now are seeking to help the growers who share the Sonoran Plateau cooperate more closely in finding ways to increase agricultural production.

The agreement was formalized in October 1990, when representatives from Arizona and Mexico met in Washington, D.C., to sign a Memorandum of Understanding between the UA and Mexico. Now researchers are seeking up to $15 million needed to start research programs that will include the exchange of researchers and students to help farmers on both sides of the border grow crops more efficiently.

Research will concentrate on the common problems Sonoran Plateau farmers confront. Whether the farmers happen to live on the Arizona or Mexico side of the border, they share the same problems of diseases and pests, quarantines, and threats of agricultural chemicals that may enter the food chain.

"We used to think Mexico was our competitor. Now that thinking is starting to change," says Merle Jensen, UA College of Agriculture assistant dean for sponsored research projects. "They may grow the food cheaper, but by the time they get through with import charges, et cetera, they have no real advantage."

To begin the project, UA scientists went to the CIANO Research Station in Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, to see how researchers in Mexico worked.

"They do wonderful open-field research there. They do a lot of development of different cereal crops, some of the best work in the world," Jensen says. "But where we can help is with biotechnology. While they have excellent scientists, they need to be brought up to speed with state-of-the-art laboratory equipment."

With the agreement, the two countries can combine their expertise and find better ways to irrigate fields and to develop drought-resistant plants that can flourish in desert environments.

Because the two countries show strength in different areas of research, it will benefit both countries financially as well. The research teams won't duplicate each other, and while American scientists can help Mexico with technology, the field research done in Mexico will help American farmers grow their own crops more economically.

"It is becoming increasingly apparent that expanded collaboration in research and education is of utmost importance to the well-being of both countries," says Eugene Sander, dean of the UA College of Agriculture.

The proposed agreement will go beyond working with the commercial growers of both nations, who farm thousands of acres. It also will include small farmers who live on *ejidos*, small plots of land granted to them by the Mexican government.

"What better way to promote peace," Jensen says, "than to work together on a need as basic as food production."

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