

Learning opportunities for all at Monsanto center

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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A focus on agriculture literacy.

Learning is a two-way street at the Monsanto Water Utilization Learning Center.

About 9,000 visitors have walked through the front door since the center opened in June 2009.

Center manager Chandler Mazour said visitors may not realize that they offer a unique experience while at the learning center.

Although the learning center is designed to help High Plains farmers produce and conserve more, Mazour said Monsanto is a better place because of what employees learn from visitors.

In fact, he said the employees that lead tours are asked to share notes from what visitors relate which are recorded and discussed at staff meetings.

Of the visitors, Mazour said 70% are farmers, dealers and retailers, 25% represent other interests with crop consultants making up 5%.

Outside of the United States, visitors have come from Japan, Spain, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Kenya, France, Germany, Israel, Brazil and India.

In addition to the center showcasing innovation in agriculture, Mazour said there's a secondary

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objective for visitors not directly connected to agriculture.

“We want to improve the agricultural and natural resources literacy of people,” he said. “People need to know where their food comes from.”

That’s especially important, Mazour said, because 48% of land owned in Nebraska is by absentee landowners.

“People are one, two and three generations removed from the farm,” he explained.

One of the groups the center has hosted is representatives from The Nature Conservancy.

Their mission is to preserve plants, animals and natural communities by protecting the land and water they need to survive.

“They walked away knowing that farmers in general are good stewards of the land,” Mazour said.

Tours are customized based on what the group requests and what is offered at the learning center.

“A tour for producers from France is much different than what would be offered to farmers in southwest Nebraska,” Mazour said, noting that more than 80 field demonstrations are available.

The more people who visit the center, the more that can be shared positively about farmers and the food they raise, he said.

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“That’s a good thing for agriculture,” Mazour said.

Another opportunity for information sharing was a visit last August by top Monsanto officials, including chief executive officer Hugh Grant, and investors.

“We were able to discuss the unique challenges farmers face in the High Plains,” he said.

Challenges included such things as time constraints from raising both crops and cattle, trials with irrigation and dealing with extreme weather, Mazour said.

“These are senior leaders in the company who make a lot of decisions,” he said. “Their commitment to come here means a lot to

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