



His Education Never Ends

By Lori Ward Bocher

He was sitting on a session of the U.S. Supreme Court, wondering if they had prepared enough material to answer all of the questions that the justices would ask in the Town of Casey suit. Once again, he was reminded: "This is quite an education for a farm boy like me who has lived on the same farm all of my life."

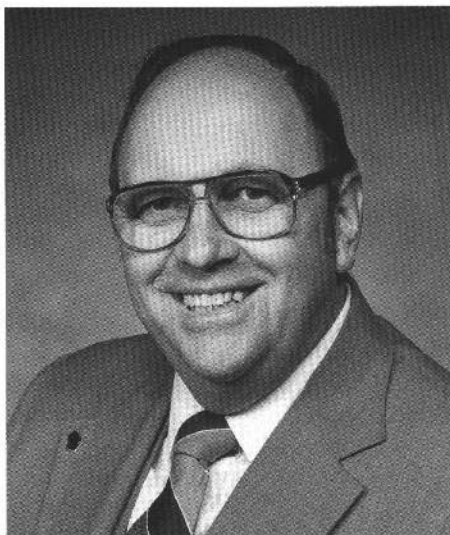
But then Russel Weisensel, executive director of the Wisconsin Agri-Business council (WA-BC), has always been one to turn every opportunity into an educational experience. And even though he's confined to a wheel chair, he's also been the one to get the ball rolling when something needs to be done.

The formation of the FRoWT coalition (forestry, rights of way and turf), and its challenge of a Town of Casey (Washburn County) ordinance that restricts pesticides use, is just one example of how Russ Weisensel tackles a challenge head on.

As director of WA-BC, he was very involved with pesticide issues long before FRoWT was formed. "We represent the broad diversity of jobs and industries relying on the renewable resources in this state," he says. "Because we bring all of these groups together, we can see an issue that might cause a problem in one area very often will spread to another area."

Pesticide regulation is one such issue that affects more than agriculture. Therefore, Weisensel helped bring together the FRoWT coalition which became a division of WA-BC in 1984. Today, there are about 1,100 members of FRoWT. "We were among the first in the U.S. to have this kind of alliance," Weisensel points out.

"Starting this organization was almost like a new career for me because of my lack of knowledge in forestry," he continues. It also was his first involvement with the turf industry. But branching off into forestry and turf seemed logical to Weisensel because he sees many similarities among agriculture, forestry and turf—especially with environmental concerns.



When the Town of Casey ordinance was chosen by FRoWT as a test case, Russ found himself learning about the legal system. "I had not worked with lawyers and courts before," he recalls. After FRoWT won in Washburn County and the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme court. Weisensel's education continued, and the challenge broadened.

"Suddenly in January of this year I was working with a little tiny budget and a great big legal challenge," he recalls. "Instead of it being a local or state issue, it became a national issue. I had a tremendous legal education, in addition to learning about fund raising and PR. That's what's fun about this job."

It's a good thing he finds fun in the job because he usually spends at least 60 hours a week at it. Where does he get the energy? "I enjoy what we're doing," he answers. "I wouldn't work well on a job that I wasn't committed to, where I didn't believe in what I was doing."

"It's a lot more than a job or career. It's a way of life," he continues. "This is a job that, when I heard about it, it interested me. And it still interests me."

Born and raised on a beef, hog and crop farm six miles northeast of Sun Prairie, Weisensel never went to high school because his father didn't believe in higher education for farmers. Eager

to learn, Russ took advantage of 4-H and other UW extension programs. "My education really was through 4-H club work and extension," he recalls. His lack of a formal education didn't stop him from winning a statewide 4-H speaking contest in 1951.

In 1959, Russ purchased the Sun Prairie farm and livestock operation from his parents. He also did some custom farm work with his brothers. But an accident in October of 1961 changed everything. While climbing up a silo chute, a rung broke and Russ fell 28 feet. He's been in a wheel chair ever since.

With five children to support, Russ and his wife, Mary, had to make some decisions. "We decided fairly early that we were going to stay on the farm," he says, adding that they wanted to raise their children in the big farm house. But they sold the livestock and rented out the farm land.

The years 1961 to 1966 were transitional for the Weisensels. "We were trying to get our lives back together," Russ recalls. "Also, I wasn't sure of what I could and could not handle." As one who is eager to learn, he also used the time to further his education.

Then, in November of 1966, Russ began his political education when he ran for the Wisconsin Legislature as a Republican and was elected to represent eastern Dane County—a heavily Democratic area. He served in the Legislature for two terms until he was defeated in 1970—the year Governor Lucey and the Democrats swept the state house. "In 1970 there was no way a Republican could have won that seat," Russ points out.

An education of another sort began in January of 1971 when Russ came to WA-BC. "It was a brand new organization and a new concept," he recalls. His actions have done much to shape the organization, and he has watched it grow from a budget of \$24,000 to one of \$210,000, combining FRoWT with the WA-BC and its educational foundation.

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Russ and WA-BC have spoken on behalf of agriculture for many different issues in the past 20 years—pesticide regulations, Wisconsin's corporate farm law, non-point source pollution from livestock waste, groundwater contamination, animal rights, child labor advisory laws, the Ag. 29 rules.

When dealing with an issue, Russ looks not at the intent of a proposed rule or regulation, but how it actually will affect farmers and agri-businesses. He marshals facts and makes them available for others to use.

"One of the biggest satisfactions of the job is seeing our material or data being used by someone else," he says. "When we see it being used we know people are reading our information and that it's presented in a way they can use it."

Russ also uses the information to go directly to legislators and rule makers himself. Although he did no direct lobbying when he first came to WA-BC, legislative work is a major emphasis for him today. He also spends time putting out a lot of fires.

"Way, way too much of my work is reactive," he says. "It is difficult to be proactive on something like BST, Alar, wetlands or atrazine because our ability to scientifically analyze things has increased far above our understanding of the risk. Our ability to produce a genetically engineered product like BST has moved further than our acceptance of such a product."

For that reason, Russ believes strongly in the need to educate people

about agriculture. More than 50 percent of WA-BC's budget is devoted to education. Anna Maenner, executive vice president, handles educational programs for WA-BC so Russ is free to do more legislative work.

"When I visited schools, I saw that there were very few people who understood agriculture," Russ says. "If you're going to do anything, you have to have people who have some kind of a concept of what agriculture is—what farmers do and why. I'm doing less, but WA-BC is doing more in the educational area."

For an organization like WA-BC, there's always more that could be done. "And I've never put anything that I didn't think could be better if we had had more time or money," Russ says. "That's the 4-H motto—'To make the best better.'"

If he had more time or money he'd like to get more involved with agricultural marketing. And he'd like to be able to take a more proactive, positive stand on issues instead of always having to put out fires.

But he knows there are limits and he is happy with what WA-BC has accomplished. "We have certainly found a need, and we've tried to fill it," he says of their efforts to work on behalf of Wisconsin agriculture and other renewable resource industries.

"It's a never ending job," he continues. "We don't know what the next issue is going to be." You can bet that, when that issue surfaces, Russ will delight in learning all he can about it, and he won't be afraid to do what needs to be done.

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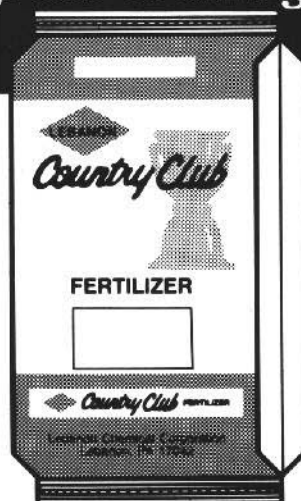
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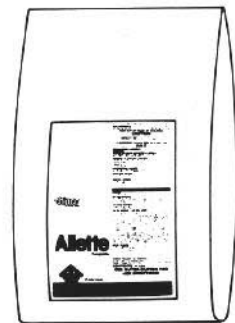
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