

An Overview: The 1st World Congress on Biostimulants in Agriculture

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Conference:

From November 26-29, 2012, I attended the First World Congress on the Use of Biostimulants in Agriculture. Over 700 people from more than 30 countries were in attendance, all of whom have a strong interest in, and energy for, this emerging field. Being an attendee offered a preview into what will likely be an expanding market and larger long-term issue in the agriculture industry.

Presentations at the conference focused on the scientific, technical, and legislative issues related to the application of biostimulants in crop production. Presenters ranged from representatives of biostimulant companies to academics who have done studies on numerous materials they consider to be biostimulants, including amino acids, humic acids, microbial inoculants, plant-derived extracts, and seaweed extracts, among others.

European Regulation:

I was particularly interested to hear from the European regulatory officials who, along with the European Biostimulants Industry Consortium (EBIC) which currently has 31 members, have made fairly significant progress in their efforts to define "biostimulant" in Europe. In Europe, biostimulant materials are used on approximately 4 million hectares, a number which is sure to grow.

Given that European authorities have acknowledged that "biostimulants" do not easily fit into a plant protection category or into a fertilizer category, they have agreed to revise the Fertilizer Regulation with the "aim to create a level playing field for fertilizers with full harmonization of all categories."

This is a model that I hope is replicated in the US. It is clear that there is an intense focus within Europe to define what biostimulants are at the governmental level, as well as for industry to provide additional research funds to continue to demonstrate the benefits of biostimulants in agriculture. What was most striking, in my opinion, was the close collaboration between government and industry to advance this initiative – with speakers citing economic, environmental and technology innovation as the reasons to get clear, consistent guidelines in place by 2015. Bringing these messages back to the US should help those in the emerging biostimulant industry gain further attention and recognition of the benefits our products bring to U.S. agriculture.

Biostimulant Coalition:

In my keynote speech, "The Legislative and Regulatory Approach to Biostimulants in the USA," I discussed The Biostimulant Coalition, which was formed in 2011 to address the regulatory and legislative issues involving biological or naturally-derived additives and/or similar products for crop production.

We are actively working with state regulators to coalesce around a definition of "biostimulant" in the US. Such a definition might include any material that, when applied to a plant, seed, soil, or growing media in conjunction with established fertilization plans, enhances the plant's nutrient use efficiency, *or* provides other direct or indirect benefits to plant development or stress response.

U.S. regulators, which include the Association of American Plant Food Control Officials (AAPFCO), the EPA, and the USDA, are interested in learning more about this category and, we hope, in addressing the patchwork regulatory structure that currently exists. Our coalition will continue to work with them to establish a category that accommodates this technology.

The interest in this topic and the well-attended biostimulants conference are both indicators to me that a similar conference would be well received in the United States by U.S. regulators, researchers, and growers.