

Meeting studies plant disease fears, terrorism

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Fears of “agro-terrorism” and ways to prevent incidents like the California wildfires were among the many topics discussed during the “Plant Biosecurity Symposium” on Tuesday and Wednesday at the Southern University Agricultural Center.

Some of the greatest threats to human welfare revolve around plant diseases often as much as human diseases, nationwide experts said throughout the two-day affair.

“Plant health is important if we want to eat,” said William Schneider, a Maryland-based specialist for foreign diseases in plants for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“A bad epidemic on something like soybeans could put a huge dent in the economy,” Schneider said, noting that soybeans are used for making everything from hamburgers to motor oil to computer chips.

“Probably everything you eat has soybeans in it at some point,” added Carrie Harmon of the University of Florida-based Southern Plant Diagnostic Network.

Daniel Collins, Southern University professor of plant pathology, said disease can spread from a variety of ways, such as terrorism or purely by accident.

“Agro-terrorism is a threat and it should not be understated,” Collins said. “We have to be prepared.”

As for wildfires, Collins said one of the ways the fires can spread is through the dead dry trees caused by new and mysterious diseases such as “sudden oak death” — a disease being studied at Southern.

The symposium, which also included plenty of LSU participation, focused on serious lectures Tuesday and more hands-on experiments Wednesday with graduate students and even middle-school students from Martin Luther King Christian Academy.

One late highlight included a demonstration from “Floyd,” a drug detection dog for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in New Orleans.

But apart from the fun and games, Collins and others focused on the serious problems threatening U.S. agriculture.

After all, Collins said, the “accidental” exposure to crops from foreign pathogens and insects is a much greater threat than terrorism or wildfires.



Schneider said there is a “perfect storm brewing” as the U.S. imports more food from developing countries. Many of these nations are tearing down rainforests in favor of planting new crops. But, in the process, they are risking exposure to all sorts of new pathogens, which can be shipped to the U.S. and spread simply by a gust of wind, he said.

A more global world is inevitable, Schneider said, so the agricultural community must be prepared.

“It’s an inevitable thing,” he said. “This is about training the next generation for the things they have to live with.”

The problem is that human disease research is much better funded than plant disease prevention, he said, so the knowledge base for crop killers is much lower.

At the same time, plant disease researchers must know about the different variety of potential diseases for every crop, Schneider said, whether it is corn, wheat or citrus.

“Every one has their own niche we have to protect,” Schneider said.

Then there are insects threatening Louisiana such as the panicle rice mite and citrus blackfly, according to the Southern AgCenter literature.

“We have to be well-versed in a huge range of threats,” Schneider said.

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