

Kent Fuchs' selection to lead UF good for Florida agriculture

BY JACK PAYNE - SVP.IFAS.UFL.EDU

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TOP GATOR: UF President-elect W. Kent Fuchs and his wife, Linda, at a news conference announcing his appointment. RAY CARSON/AP

The selection of Dr. W. Kent Fuchs (pronounced "Fox") as the next president of the University of Florida should be cause for celebration for anyone who cares about Florida agriculture and natural resources.

Fuchs was born on an Oklahoma farm. It was such a tough life that his dad decided Alaska would be more forgiving, and it's where Fuchs grew up until the family moved to Miami, where he attended high school.

And let's remember, he's provost at one of the most venerable of land-grant universities, Cornell. It's the only Ivy League school with a horticultural department, much less a School of Integrative Plant Science like the one Fuchs helped launch.

Before Cornell, he was a leader at Purdue, also a land-grant university. So he's well versed in the land-grant missions of teaching, research and extension.

With his Florida, agriculture, and land-grant bona fides, he sold me on being the right person for the job when he told me that if hired he would go on a statewide tour of stakeholder meetings. Not just to meet donors and alumni, but growers, commodity leaders, natural resource managers and UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension agents.

That's a promising sign that he intends to honor the public-service ethic of the land-grant university. He sees his new job the same way I see mine — that his office is not a room in Gainesville, but it's the entire state.

UF's land-grant mission is supposed to apply university-wide. Traditionally, though, UF/IFAS has more demonstrably implemented it than many other branches of the university.

There's potential for real change in this area as our medical center leaders see in extension the opportunity to do so much more to promote public health. Similarly, our engineering administrators have approached IFAS about working through extension to bring technical assistance to businesses and communities.

There are also opportunities for IFAS to do more to serve Florida's \$142-billion-a-year agriculture and natural resource industries, particularly after six years of flat or declining state funding.

Support from UF's leader is essential to IFAS's quest to provide solutions to citrus greening, to tackle the state's water challenges, to expand the work of our agricultural leadership institute and to help Florida prepare for climate change and sea-level rise.

The land-grant system was founded more than 150 years ago on the noble proposition of democratizing higher education.

Today IFAS seeks support from the UF administration to expand four-year online degree programs.

We offer these at a discounted tuition to students who by choice or circumstance need a UF education to come to them instead of having to move to Gainesville.

We're hiring more bilingual 4-H agents and partnering with organizations that serve minority populations as we seek to better serve people who have traditionally been underrepresented in our youth development programs.

It'll take a commitment from the top to secure the resources needed to realize IFAS's potential and to help define the 21st Century land-grant university.

When we met for dinner recently, over salad I began probing the extent to which this man intended to honor the land-grant mission with action.

By decafs and dessert, I was presenting him with the Gator pin right off my own lapel and letting him know he'd be receiving a copy of *A Land Remembered* from me.

Some on the search committee — including myself and University of Florida plant breeder Harry Klee — specifically championed an appreciation for the land-grant mission as an important consideration in the search for a new president. We're gratified to see we have it in Kent Fuchs, and we hope you'll get to see it on his visits around the state.

JACK PAYNE IS THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES AND HEAD OF THE INSTITUTE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES.