Gannaway Retires after 46 Years in the Cotton Industry

Writer: Steve Byrns, 325-653-4576, s-byrns@tamu.edu
Contact: Dr. John Gannaway, 806-746-6101, j-gannaway@tamu.edu

LUBBOCK – Aug. 31 will mark the end of an era for an icon in the cotton industry.

That's when Dr. John R. Gannaway will officially retire as professor and cotton breeder from Texas AgriLife Research in Lubbock.

Gannaway took over the cotton breeding position at the then Lubbock Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in 1980 and never left.

"This was a dream come true." Gannaway, said. "The Lubbock position was my goal, and it has been a rewarding experience to know that I actually achieved it. This center is in the midst of the largest contiguous cotton producing region in the world, and the producers were, and remain, the most progressive and aggressive anywhere."

Gannaway began working for the state agricultural research agency now known as AgriLife Research in 1962 as an undergraduate at Texas A&M University. A genetics course inspired him to become a cotton breeder, as did remembrances of his father who often said: "Without research, this is as good as it's going to get."

Gannaway said he had the privilege while at A&M to be mentored by two giants in the cotton industry, the late Dr. Tom Richmond, a U.S. Department of Agriculture cotton scientist and Dr. G. A. Niles, his major professor through his master's and doctoral programs.

In 1974, Gannaway took the AgriLife Research cotton breeding position at El Paso where he found a high-strength cotton fiber variety that would impact the cotton industry and his career. The discovery was the first of many.

Since moving to Lubbock, he has released 398 cotton breeding lines with traits including high fiber strength, cold and drought tolerance, early maturity, fiber fineness and nematode resistance.

Gannaway credits the Plains Cotton Improvement Program initiated by the late Joel Hembree and Rex McKinney for much of his Lubbock program funding.

"Without their cooperation, their funding and belief in what I was trying to do, we would not have been as successful as we have been in raising the standard of High Plains cotton to the position it enjoys now," he said. "Dale Swinburn of Tulia now chairs the program's oversight committee, and I owe a debt of gratitude to all those members for their trust and friendship, as well as the funding."

In 2003, the cotton-breeding program under Gannaway's leadership significantly expanded with the addition of 12 state-of-the-art greenhouses. The complex was funded by the state of Texas through a research initiative. It is currently used to screen wild cottons from around the world for traits that could enhance U.S. cottons.

"I'll miss the people most when I leave this job: colleagues, mentors, producers, graduate students, and undergrads, and support staff," he said. "But I'll probably also miss working with that beautiful little plant that has ruled my life."

Gannaway may not miss it long though. He plans to move back to Haskell where he has family banking interests and farmland that typically produces plenty of that "beautiful little plant" that has defined him for so many years.

Gannaway leaves behind cotton genetic material which he expects his successor and longtime colleague, Dr. Jane Dever, will work to release.

"Dr. Dever is no stranger to this area, as she worked with me while securing her graduate degrees at Texas Tech University," he said. "She also has corporate experience, so she knows the needs of the industry. I know the program will continue to be highly productive. I'm pleased and satisfied it's in good hands."

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