

Gates Foundation CEO outlines agriculture goals

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LINCOLN, Neb. -- Agriculture is a poverty solution that's been ignored by poor countries and the large donor nations that give them aid, the CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation said Monday.

Jeff Raikes, a former Microsoft executive, outlined an agriculture plan that has since January 2008 committed \$1.2 billion toward helping small farmers in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa boost yields and reduce costs, among other things.

Raikes talked about the foundation's agriculture program at a conference at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The conference was focused on water - ensuring there is enough to grow a sufficient amount of food worldwide.

"We see agriculture as a compelling solution" to poverty, said Raikes. But the Nebraska native also said agriculture is "a solution that's been ignored."

Spending on agriculture in sub-Saharan African countries, where the foundation focuses much of its poverty-fighting efforts, accounts for less than 5 percent of their total government budgets, Raikes said. And from 1985 to 2005, spending as a percentage of government budgets decreased in donor countries, he said, including the U.S.

The largest philanthropic foundation in the world, the Gates Foundation gave out \$2.8 billion worth of grants last year. Late last year, the foundation said payouts this year would grow by about 10 percent, less than previously planned, because of the troubled economy.

The foundation was started in 1994 by Microsoft Corp. co-founder Bill Gates and his wife and has the international goals of overcoming hunger, poverty and disease. In this country, its focus is on education, which receives about a quarter of the foundation's grant dollars.

About half of the foundation's other grants are aimed at improving health across the globe. The remaining quarter of the grants fight poverty and hunger.

Raikes talked about \$73 million in grants aimed at south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa :

- \$40 million over the next five years to develop drought-tolerant corn with the goal of helping 30 million to 40 million farmers boost their yields by 20 percent to 30 percent.

- \$13 million over four years for more efficient irrigation to help 100,000 farmers double their incomes and increase yields by 30 percent.

- \$10 million over four years to help women develop education and training programs related to agriculture. Raikes said that in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia , women make up about 80 percent of the agricultural work force.

- \$10 million over three years to develop public policies aimed at increasing crop yields.

Raikes said the foundation has a long-term goal of tripling the income of 150 million small farmers by 2025.

Geographic concentration and lifestyle similarities among the poorest of the poor lead him to believe that "hunger and poverty are solvable" if there is more attention on agricultural development.

Seventy-eight percent of the world's people who live on a dollar or less a day are in Sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia , he said. And of the roughly 1 billion people who live on a dollar or less a day, three-fourths are in rural areas.

Hundreds of millions of farmers are realizing just a fraction of their potential and sub-Saharan Africa in particular has room to grow agriculturally as just 5 percent of its crop land is now irrigated.

But Raikes pointed to projections that precipitation in Africa could decrease in coming decades because of global climate change.

"We have to think about adapting," he told the water experts gathered at the conference. "It means we have to have the agility to respond."