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Texas A&M System Researchers Sought for Agent Orange Remediation

October 14, 2011 by: Kay Ledbetter

COLLEGE STATION – It's been almost 50 years since Agent Orange was spread as a jungle defoliant across parts of Vietnam in a conflict that has since healed, but the same may not be true for the land, according to Texas A&M University and Texas AgriLife Research officials who are being sought out for some answers.



Dr. Hoang Van Thang from the Vietnam National University, far left, and Dr. Scott Senseman, Texas AgriLife Research weed scientist, watch as two employees of the Thien Thuy province help collect a soil sample near a temporary airport in South Vietnam where Agent Orange had been stored during the Vietnam War. (Courtesy photo)

Faculty from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, especially Dr. Scott Senseman, a professor in the department of soil and crop sciences and an AgriLife Research weed scientist specializing in pesticide fate and management, have been asked to participate in a project with Vietnam National University–Hanoi.

The partnership has been identified as a key strategic project by the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam. Senseman was recently invited to address the Joint Advisory Commission, the key inter-governmental commission for cooperation between the two governments, about the collaboration.

This meeting was represented by individuals from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Center for Disease Control, UNICEF, U.S. Embassy attachés, the U.S.

Ambassador to Vietnam, Vietnamese scientists and regulators, and consultants responsible for dioxin cleanup at Vietnamese airports where Agent Orange had been stored during the conflict.

The primary aim of the initial project is to identify bioremediation solutions for approximately 7 million acres of forest and about 1.2 million acres of agricultural land that were destroyed by Agent Orange and similar agents during the war, as well as overuse of the land, Senseman said.

Dr. Randy Kluver, executive director for Asia and the Pacific, Office of International Affairs with Texas A&M, had been contacted by faculty from Vietnam National University in 2010 regarding possible Texas A&M involvement.

Kluver said Dr. Duong Van Hop, director of the Institute of Microbiology and Biotechnology in Hanoi, contacted Texas A&M because of the university's expertise in agriculture, and particularly with issues related to dioxin contamination.

In response to the request, Kluver and Senseman visited Hanoi in May and met with several distinguished officials and scientists of Vietnam National University, as well as U.S. Embassy officials to discuss the collaboration.

Senseman visited affected regions in South Vietnam with faculty from Vietnam's university. He also reviewed Hop's work related to trace amounts of dioxin detected in selected areas of South Vietnam and determined there were, in fact, soil concentrations remaining in the hundreds of parts per trillion.

The expanded project will include collaboration between a number of Texas A&M colleges and units and Vietnamese partners such as the National University of Hanoi, Vietnamese Academy of Sciences, University of Hue, Vietnam University of Agriculture and the Vietnam-Russia Tropical Center.

Potential research activities that have been outlined include: microbial genetics, microbial activity and community shifts, surface water monitoring, water filtration, ecophysiology, crop rotations, residue analysis of biomass and fertility programs.

The consortium envisions a multi-year project involving multiple steps, including:

- Collecting data and information related to soil degradation and dioxin contamination in the south of Vietnam.**
- Analyzing soil samples and developing soil degradation and dioxin contamination maps.**
- Developing technologies to address soil degradation.**
- Evaluating fertility products on an experimental scale, pilot scale and large-scale production basis.**

The ultimate goal is to improve productivity while keeping a fertile, productive soil environment and ensuring dioxin content in agricultural products such as rice and coffee are minimized, Senseman said.

The final steps will be to train and educate the community on managing safety and agriculturally sustainable development, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the socioeconomics of the projects, Kluver said.

Funding for the project is being sought through different sources, including the National Science Foundation's Partnerships for International Research and Education grants, he said.

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<http://agrillife.org/today/2011/10/14/texas-am-system-researchers-sought-for-agent-orange-remediation/>