

USDA CONFERENCE AN EYE-OPENER FOR GRADUATE STUDENT

by OLGA KUCHMENT on MARCH 10, 2014

On February 22, Jose Luis Perez took a trip that helped him meet professionals in his chosen career and reinforced his feeling that he was headed in the right direction.

He applied and was selected as the only student from Texas A&M University to attend the U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Outlook Forum, a conference on the problems facing agriculture in the near future. Perez works for USDA Agricultural Research Service while pursuing a doctorate in horticulture at Texas A&M University at the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center.

“The trip was eye-opening. Even though I work for the USDA, there’s so much I didn’t know,” Perez says. “I’m reassured that this is the place where I want to be.”

After completing his doctorate, Perez would like to continue working for USDA-ARS and eventually at the headquarters in Maryland, which he toured during the trip.

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

For his doctoral project, Perez is researching ways to cultivate bitter melons in Texas. The fruits—“they are really bitter,” says Perez—are thought to be therapeutic. In traditional Chinese medicine, they are principally used to manage intestinal disorders, infections, and diabetes. Perez is working to isolate beneficial compounds from the plants. He grew up in South Texas, a hotspot for diabetes.

Perez does his doctoral work during off time from his job as a chemist at the USDA-ARS center in College Station. There, Perez researches the pheromone composition of insect pests of cotton and the chemical attractants of various weed hosts. He has worked there for six years and has received much support from his supervisors and the administration.

“They’ve been helping out so much,” Perez says. “I want to do the same thing for other young students when I graduate. Getting students interested in research and agriculture is one of my main goals.”

Public outreach

Along with research, outreach would be a key part of Perez’s dream job. At the USDA Outlook Forum, Perez got important tips on reaching out to the public.

Speakers addressed how to get the public to consume more fruits and vegetables, how to explain the difference between organic and conventional produce, and how to reassure people about the safety of some genetically modified foods. People may not know that some canned fruits are often fresher than fresh ones found at the

store: Canned fruits travel straight from the field to the can in a few hours.

In one session about public outreach, a speaker discussed an urban agriculture organization that shows people how to grow food and gives cooking tips.

“There’s a lot of produce out there that people don’t know how to eat, so they just stay away from it,” Perez says.

BIG PICTURE

A better understanding of public outreach was just one of the benefits of the trip for Perez.

“The networking was just amazing,” Perez says. “I met so many people. I got a job offer.”

Perez says he got “the feel of how stuff works in Washington.” For example, he unexpectedly found himself being filmed for television while asking a question during a panel discussion.



“I got up and suddenly see cameras pointed at me,” Perez says. “I came up on CSPAN.”

Perez asked the panel about the future of agricultural research. In recent years the United States has seen cuts in agricultural research funding.

“What does the future look like for young professionals such as me?” Perez asked. “Will the money and opportunities keep on shrinking?”

The panel reassured him of the certainty of jobs in agriculture but stressed the importance of big investments in agricultural research. Only 1 percent of the United States’ population farms professionally. Farmers depend on researchers to maintain the country’s level of agricultural production.

At the Maryland USDA-ARS headquarters, Perez listened to staff members talk about their jobs.

“They talked the same way that I feel—every day you come in, there’s something new to do, it doesn’t get monotonous, and the environment really fosters growth within the agency,” Perez says. “I’m really glad I am where I am right now.”

PERMALINK: <http://aglifesciences.tamu.edu/blog/2014/03/10/usda-conference-an-eye-opener-for-graduate-student/>