Episode 26 – Meet Extension's New Grains Specialist

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Announcer:

The Alabama Crops Report podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama agriculture.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Hello everyone. And welcome to the Alabama Crops Report podcast. I'm Dr. Amanda Scherer, an Extension plant pathologist.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And I'm Katelyn Kesheimer Extension entomologist. And we're excited to be here on another episode of the podcast and very excited for our guest today, which I'm sure many of our listeners will be glad to hear from. Today we have our new Extension Grain Crops Agronomist, Dr. Eros Francisco, who just started this month. And Dr. Francisco will be working in agronomics in corn, wheat, sorghum, and also other crops like sorghum, barley, rye oats. Eros, welcome to the podcast.

Eros Francisco:

Oh, thanks for having me. It's a pleasure.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. So we got you right at the beginning. So you've only been on campus for a short time, correct?

Eros Francisco:

Yes, only for one week.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Wow. So definitely brand new to the team, but Katelyn and I especially are definitely excited to have you, cause we both have responsibilities in small grains and forages. So it's just nice to have you on the team to really round out that part that we are kind of missing for the agronomic crops.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

<affirmative> yeah, Amanda, you always talk about the disease triangle, but I feel like this can be the new grain crop triangle. We got insects and diseases and agronomics. And so I'm really excited on working with you Eros.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

So something we like to do on the pod here is when we have guests, we ask them to share a fun fact about themselves. So our listeners can get to know them. So what fun fact do you want to share this morning?

Eros Francisco:

That's a good question. I never thought about having a fun fact, but <laugh> well, let's go. I've been agronomist for 22 years. And one thing that drawed my attention to agronomy was I had a very nice friend from my childhood and his father was a farmer and he was not paying too much attention to the farm. And so his father always rely on me to get his attention to doing farming because he would be the next generation on the farm. So I was like trying to push my friend to be a real farmer. And in fact, I got interested in agriculture. And so here I am 22 years after that. Well, much more time before that, but that was my interest in becoming an agronomist, helping my friend to become a farmer.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

You had peer pressure and you caved and had also found something that you really love.

Eros Francisco:

Yes. And I was not a too much in the [inaudible 00:02:56] side of, my family was living in the city at that time. So my father is a physician, but I never thought myself being a physician as well. So that caught my attention to farming.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

So I think our listeners may notice that you do not have an Alabama accent, but it's a little bit farther away. So you came to Alabama all the way from Brazil.

Eros Francisco:

Yes. But we can fix that. Switch me. Yeah. How y'all doing. <laugh> Hope y'all doing fine.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Yeah. As, as a Yankee myself, I do find myself staying y'all a lot. So yeah, the south will grow on you.

Eros Francisco:

But I do have an experience with Alabama. I was a scientist visiting Alabama in 2005 when I did part of my doctorate degree at IFDC in north Alabama in Muscle Shoals, where IFDC is located. So I spent one year in Alabama, so I kind of know the place and get used to know the people. And, I love Alabama. It's a very nice place to live.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

It is. And Katelyn and I are both pretty new to extension ourselves, but I grew up mostly in Florida, but I was born in Colorado and the Southern sayings of y'all and other, it'll just sneak up on you. And there's some words that I say that sound very Southern, I've noticed. And then other words, I still have the weird Colorado Midwestern accent. So <laugh>.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

It all blends together after a while. Mm-hmm <affirmative> so Eros, you have a wealth of experience. You're talking 22 years as an agronomist. Can you maybe talk about some of the major issues that you and growers were experiencing maybe back in Brazil and some of the research projects that you did to kind of help with those issues?

Eros Francisco:

Yeah, sure. Well, I started my career after my graduation working for a fertilizer plant in Brazil, and I was responsible for dealing with the customers for product quality. And I was visiting many fields at that time because farmers complain about fertilizer quality mostly due to the dust that is in part of the product, basically mostly related to KCL, the potash. But I anyways, the day by day basis of a farm in Brazil is very hard. Well, farming is hard. Farming is for brave ones because you got to wake up early it too, up, too late. And you spend most of your day in the sun collecting salt samples or scouting fields, running machines. So it's a tough profession to have. But anyways, then I went back to the university and got my degrees. My first degree, my Master was in Crop Science.

Eros Francisco:

I studied the soybean relationship with the cropping systems regarding anticipating fertilization for a different crop. In the time we use it, very new crop moving in the cropping systems. And that was back in 2001. So the idea was to release the pressure of the planting time for soybean and try to put the fertilizer into the field in the

previous crop. It did work at that time. We found out that it was possible depending on the salt fertility that we were dealing, but then farmers adopted that as a recommended practice. And if you go in Brazil, nowadays, most of the cropping systems rely on applying fertilizer in a different crop and also applying previous to planting. So at planting, they just apply the seed. And it goes very fast. Recently, I was working one with one client, I'm kind of moving forward in my description, but lately I was working as a crop consultant and one of my clients, he was able to, to plant 2000 acres a day.

Eros Francisco:

So it's a lot and it moves fast if you blink, they are already done. So it was a nice management practice to develop at that time. Then I got my Doctorate in Soil and Plant Nutrition, and then I became a professor in a private college and also at the Federal University in Mato Grosso, which is my home state in Brazil. I kind of experienced teaching for couple years. And then I moved to a research institution in my state, and I developed many projects of research and during that time, I learned to meet with the farmers and understand what are their needs from the research perspective. As an extensionist, you've got to understand what are the needs from that side, not from your side. It's complicated if you try to present the ideas to a farmer, if he is not interested in that idea, if your idea is not too good to the system. So you have to come around the farmers and understand what are the difficulties related to the cropping systems. Is that seed depth? Is that variety? Is that fungicide application? Is that managing insects? Is that harvesting?

Eros Francisco:

So, what is going on in the cropping system that you have to help the farmers to overcome? So that's what I am trying to do. And I always try to focus my research on the cropping systems, not in my own ideas and try to feed my ideas to the farmers. It has to be the opposite. You have to learn farmers, learn to the farmers and let them guide your ideas and your steps through research. And then I had a very nice experience with IPNI, the International Plant Nutrition Institute, since 2012 to 2019, I had opportunity to visit the different countries of Malaysia, China, Germany, Argentina, Chile, Canada, United States. And that gave me a broad perspective of agriculture across the group, the globe from wheat to peanuts to Palm trees and many other crops.

Eros Francisco:

And the funny thing is, it's kind the same. Even in Malaysia, if you're running through a Palm orchard, the system is almost like a wheat field. You got plants in the row. You have to count the number of leaves. You have to count the number of fruits that the Palm is bearing. The only difference is, wheat you have 90 days to harvest while the Palm will take two years to harvest the branch. So, but their [inaudible 00:11:00] is almost the same. Then when IP and I decided to shut down its activities. Then when I moved to the private sector and started a crop consultant firm myself, and then I could enter the farm in a way that I have to solve problems and day by day basis for the farmers. So that kind of gave me even more experience to understand how the farmer thinks and what he has to deal in a day by day basis.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

You said a couple things there that I want to just kind of reiterate that I really also like, too, that you said, to farm is to be brave. And I think that's a really good point too, because there's so many risk factors. If Adam was here, he'd comment on risk, but yeah, there's so many risk factors associated with farming. And then the second point is, we can't do as researchers, all the things that we want to do. Our research programs are driven by the needs of our stakeholders. And so it sounds like you're a really good fit for this position. And I imagine a lot of us are really excited to have you here. And so have you given any thought to maybe some of the projects that you're hoping to get involved with here in Alabama?

Eros Francisco:

I'm trying to meet with different professors and seek their needs, what they need to understand and the whole cropping system, if they need assistance. And also, I would like very much to visit with farmers and to the Extinction agents across the state. And because I need to have that local perspective that they have. Each region has a challenge. It is weather, it is soil, it is insect, it is practice management. What kind of detail is missing or is complicating the farming to moves on? So that's my goal in this first month is to visit with many farmers I can and the agents to bring back to office this whole contest, and then start writing proposals because I said, that's the way I like to go. I like to hear the needs first and then propose how to move forward.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

And Eros that's one of the great things about having a split research and extension appointment. I feel we get a lot of our feedback and ideas too, just from talking with growers. And then you're conducting research that they're directly interested in that's going to help them on their farm. And I really like your ideas of going out and meeting the producers and utilizing our REA's. We have a lot of young, new REA's to the team that are really excited to get out there. And I know they'd be more than happy to help you make those connections. And that kind of gets me curious, you've done quite a few different things in your career, from crop consultant and so what drew you to this position and Extension in particular, what makes you excited about Extension?

Eros Francisco:

A very good question. I'm going to be very honest. The Extension part of this position that is what I was use to do in Brazil. Is to connecting with people, is to try to answer questions in a way they understand. We cannot address farmers in a very high technical way, in a very high scientific manner. You have to speak their language. I'm not saying that a farmer is not educated. I'm saying that we, in the academia, we discuss scientific subjects and perhaps we have to get easy when we speak to farmers and make sure that they understand what we are proposing, what we are suggesting them to do, which is different than what he already do. So what really drew my attention to this position was getting to work with the crops that I'm using. I'm very much using to work with soybeans and cotton.

Eros Francisco:

I know wheat, but soybeans and corn I'm using 20 years of experience with dealing with soybeans and corn. Dealing with varieties, with hybrids, with plant stands, with insects and fungicide, and diseases, harvesting

machines and calibrating machines to enter the field. So that is part that I was using to do in Brazil and all related and answer questions and develop new practices related to the day by days of a farm. So, and the extension is what I like to do. I like to get in contact with the farmer to help the farmer to scout a field, to look for an insect, to pull up a plant and see the roots, check for nematodes, discuss soil fertility, discuss nutrient management, discuss fungicide application, what to observe, what to take care in managing an insect. And so on. So the extension part is what I like to do. And research, I started my career as a field researcher. So I was trained to do research. I was trained to be observant of details and use the methodology to answer if a hypothesis is correct or no. Being able to merge my experience in research with the extension part, that was a very happy combination that I could have with this position.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Well, I know we're really excited to have you, and, and it sounds like you have some trips planned to go meet with REA's and meet with growers around the state, but for those growers that maybe want to get in touch with you sooner than later, what is the best way to reach you? I know you are on Twitter and you have your email and phone up and running already.

Eros Francisco:

Yes, I do. Yeah. I do have a Twitter account. I have a email. I can say it's efrancisco@auburn.edu, or you can give me a call in my office is (334) 844-5450. I'm very happy to help anybody in need. So let's get together and let's make Alabama more productive and more profitable. Cause profitability is another point that a farmer has to be aware of. And we as extensionists and researchers, we have to put profitability in the equation, for sure. Yeah. There's no management practices that we can suggest that is being costly and not profitable. So it's a burden to a farm if we decide to suggest cost things and not profitable ones.

Dr. Amanda Scherer:

Absolutely, well said. Well, thanks, Eros. It was great to have you on this episode. And I know that you'll probably be getting some phone calls and emails soon and personally, I look forward to working with you and tackling some of the issues we have here in Alabama.

Eros Francisco:

Oh, I appreciate the invitation to speak in podcast.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So that ends our time today with Dr. Eros Francisco, an Assistant Professor and our new Extension Grain Crops Agronomist. We really appreciate your time today on the Alabama Crops Report Podcast. And as always, if we could be any help to anyone, don't hesitate to reach out.

Announcer:

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