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ADM, U of I start food-waste research

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URBANA — Farmers in Argentina have found that simply using jumbo plastic bags can help protect their harvested corn from the elements before it's sold and heads for processing.

Measures like that — which could cut down on the millions of pounds of grain that spoil or otherwise go to waste each year — will be the focus of a new effort at the University of Illinois to find ways to help feed the developing world.

Archer Daniels Midland CEO Patricia Woertz and university officials announced plans Wednesday for the new ADM Institute for the Prevention of Postharvest Loss at the university's campus in Urbana. ADM plans to spend \$10 million over the next five years on the effort.

"There are existing technologies today that we know are not being implemented in developing countries," University Vice Chancellor Steve Sonka, who will lead the institute, said in an interview. "We need to know why."

The United Nations estimates that 10 to 15 percent or perhaps more of the world's grain goes to waste each year. At the same time, roughly a billion people around the world don't have enough to eat — ADM cited University of Illinois research that indicates the wheat and rice lost around the world in 2007 could have fed about 380 million people.

"Clearly, preserving what is already grown is fundamental to feeding the world, and to making the most of the land, water, energy and other inputs already used to grow crops," said Woertz.

ADM, based 50 miles southwest of the university in Decatur, is one of the largest processors of corn, soybeans and other grains in the world.

The new institute will start work by trying to find and develop easy-to-use technologies like the corn bags in Argentina, studying why they're not being used in the developing world and figuring out to put them to work there, Sonka said.

"What's being done and what are the impediments?" Sonka said. "Just assessing the current situation in a rigorous fashion."

Then he anticipates using the money to put researchers to work and getting the technology to the farmers and others who can put it to use. He isn't sure how many people he will need.

The institute also plans to work with similar efforts at schools like the University of California-Davis, where research focuses on wasted fruits and vegetables, Sonka said. He also hopes to work with government agencies and other groups around the world.

While ADM's commitment to the institute lasts five years — at \$2 million a year — Sonka hopes the work attracts attention and funding from governments and other companies.

"We believe this is a topic that has legs," he said.