

NATIONAL

US farm crisis worries rise as industry looks to AI, supply collaboration for answers

BY NOAH FISH
Agweek

MINNEAPOLIS — The focus for Reuters Events' Transform Food & Agriculture USA 2025 was finding ways to build more resilient supply chains to meet the demands of a rising global population, said the event's director.

Sofia Gerrard, project director in food and agriculture for Reuters Events, said that was the underlying aim while also addressing the current market volatility and policy shaping the U.S. ag industry.

Leaders from the agri-food industry led panel discussions and included executives from Whole Foods Market, Cargill, Land O'Lakes, Corteva Agriscience, Fresh Del Monte, Hormel Foods, JBS and more.

It's the third U.S. edition of the event series which includes a European conference, which focused mostly this year around the market impact from the European Union's new Deforestation Regulation.

The U.S. event dug into its own set of market challenges including more consumer demand for health and transparency, popularity of GLP-1 drugs and the Make America Healthy Again agenda.

"I think the big thing right now is really a tight focus on not just the nutrition piece, and food-as-health, but also that transparency piece," Gerrard said. "We have a big sustainability focus, so sourcing transparency when it comes to food, and food production."

Elephant in the room

Not addressed specifically in panel discussions at the event's first day was the potential crisis



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Florian Schattenmann, CTO of Cargill, speaks with Marisa Kopec, president of Lux Research at the opening session of Reuters Events' Transform Food and Agriculture USA held on October 14-15 in Minneapolis.

level for current U.S. crop farmers, during their harvest season, from a high-stakes trade war: A week before the Reuters event, the Trump administration was expected to announce a plan that would bail out U.S. farmers hurt by trade disputes but an ongoing government shutdown prevented that from happening.

The National Corn Growers Association released a survey last month of over 1,000 farmers that showed nearly half believe the U.S. economy is on the brink of a farm crisis. Two-thirds are more concerned about their farm's finances than a year ago.

Gerrard said she expected conversations regarding a potential farm crisis to progress from between attendees in hallways and breaks during the event to being asked as questions during stage conversations



Noah Fish / Agweek

A bowl of buttons at Reuters Events' Transform Food and Agriculture USA.

on day two.

"It's definitely relevant, and people are very curious," she said, adding that the event's open forum format would allow for such issues to reach the forefront. "We've got a few different conversations around tariffs, geopolitical issues, etc., so the idea of the

roundtables is to be able to engage with some of the speakers and the audience members and have a more open dialogue, and be able to ask follow-up questions to see, is this happening right now, and what's next for us? How do we have to adapt within the next year, two years, five

years, to meet some of these challenges head on?"

Cargill builds for the future with AI

Florian Schattenmann, Cargill's chief technology officer and vice president for innovation and research & development, chose to focus on the opportunities that exist in the current ag and food industry rather than the financial marks.

Cargill, which is the largest private company in the U.S, saw its revenue decline this year to its lowest point in four years.

CEO Brian Sikes said in the annual report that they were making "strategic decisions to fuel growth" for the company and the customers it serves. In the past year, Cargill has decreased its number of business units to three from five and cut around 8,000 jobs.

"I mean, revenue bounces around, and we typically don't talk about our financials as a private company," Schattenmann said. "For us, it's more like what's going on in the world. How do we make sure that in the emerging world of AI and and what's happening around the world, that we are best positioned to win here? I think that's really what's driving all this."

On the topic of AI, he said Cargill's "level of fluency" in AI is going up "literally every day."

"We built very focused AI platforms to give us certain value and solve certain challenges, so that can be around in my area of R&D, it can be around how to compress the discovery phase of a new innovation, how to make sure that we get better data, and make sure that we can really have access to all the data across the house of Cargill," Schattenmann said. "And how do we interact with our customers more effectively? We're building specifically trained, large language models, and specific apps to help with that."

Schattenmann said that AI is "becoming more and more a way of life," but Cargill doesn't view more incorporation of AI as less human jobs in the company, although that is the current trend. He said the company has an ethics committee for AI, so "the final word is always the human."

"This is more of an effectiveness and efficiency enhancer model, and giving us more speed and more capabilities," Schattenmann said. "It's certainly not less human, and as a matter of fact, especially in the food and ag space, the human element is absolutely critical."