



# Research dean ready to make an impact

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**W**hen Rob Gilbert interviewed to become what is essentially my right-hand man for Florida agriculture research and development, he clearly identified top research priorities. Among them was HLB.

That didn't change when Gilbert started as the dean of research for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) last month. Gilbert has sought to make a positive impact on industry throughout his career. He can think of no bigger impact than *saving* an industry.

Gilbert spent his career seemingly preparing for this job. He knows how our off-campus research stations work — he ran the Everglades Research and Education Center (EREC) in Belle Glade as director. He knows how academic departments work — he served as chair of the UF/IFAS Agronomy Department.

## FINDING FUNDING AMIDST CHALLENGES

Grant money to the EREC increased by 365 percent on Gilbert's watch. Since he took over the Agronomy Department, funding is up by 136 percent.

He's done all this in an environment where he's had federal funding agencies, producers, environmentalists, local politicians, university administrators and even law enforcement looking over his shoulder. He has succeeded in sugar and hemp. He can handle the heat of citrus.

If you've heard anything about sugar in the Everglades, then you can appreciate that Gilbert's work as a cane scientist there was done in a pressure-packed environment. Or how about managing the first stages of research on a crop (hemp) that investors and producers are clamoring for, but that the Drug Enforcement



**Rob Gilbert is the new dean of research for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.**

Administration had at the time classified as a Schedule I drug?

Gilbert has helped promote accurate media coverage and a clear distinction between industrial hemp and marijuana by telling reporters that while they are both cannabis, so are Chihuahuas and Great Danes both dogs. "If you smoke it, you'll be sorely disappointed," he has been quoted as saying about industrial hemp.

## ACCOMPLISHED LEADER

Gilbert didn't wait for me to discover his talent for leadership. He has served as president of the Florida section of the American Society of Sugar Cane Technologists and as agricultural commissioner for the International Society of Sugar Cane Technologists.

In Belle Glade, he started a "Fishing for Scholars" fundraising event that raises more than \$10,000 annually for

college scholarships for high school students living in the Glades or whose parents are affiliated with the Florida sugarcane industry.

He also appreciates the value of Extension. As a member of UF President Kent Fuchs' Goal-Setting Task Force, he championed the inclusion of Extension in the resulting Decade Ahead plan. As a result, the plan calls for "A strengthened public engagement of the university's programs with local, national and international communities."

All of this is why I've promoted Gilbert for a third time in eight years. He's an accomplished scientist and an accomplished leader.

## HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

Gilbert will face the huge challenge of overseeing agricultural research in a state that produces some 300 commodities. That's a lot of ground to cover, and he intends to start covering it on a listening tour in early 2019.

His first job will be to continue the momentum. Last year UF/IFAS received a record \$166 million in contracts and grants. That's up 54 percent from the previous year.

His leadership will be informed by lessons learned as a scientist in gaining stakeholders' trust, aligning a research agenda with real-world needs, and building buy-in from both internal and external partners. It'll also be informed by an overlap of several weeks with retiring dean Jackie Burns, who as you know is a citrus expert par excellence.

It all adds up to an appreciation for the value of impactful research. Memories of the muck in and on his shoes in the cane field remind him it takes hard work to make that impact. There's no reason for him to believe it's any different in the grove — or in the dean's office. 🍊

*Jack Payne is the University of Florida's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and head of the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.*