DATA'S
DOUBLE-EDGED
SWORD

Predictive analytics could boost profits — but at what cost to your privacy?
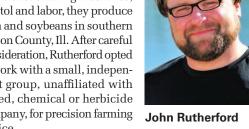
By Christy Couch Lee

When a large agricultural company approached John Rutherford about sharing sensitive production information — including soil type, yield and soil fertility — with the promise of a prescription for variable-rate seeding in return, he weighed the decision carefully. And then he passed.

"I wouldn't say it's impossible for someone with enough data to produce enough information to make it meaningful and valuable," he says. "You must be careful, though. I wouldn't put it past certain people to basically take advantage of the naïve, or at the least, the computer-science naïve."

Welcome to the new world of predictive analytics, or statistical analysis dealing with the extraction of information from data to predict future trends. It's increasingly being utilized in all industries, including agriculture. Potentially, this practice could increase yields and, thus, revenue. But it's not without a few cautions. Could it

be precision agriculture's next big step?

Rutherford and partner, Jim Snow, operate Synergy Ag Solutions. Sharing machines, capitol and labor, they produce corn and soybeans in southern Macon County, Ill. After careful consideration, Rutherford opted to work with a small, independent group, unaffiliated with a seed, chemical or herbicide company, for precision farming advice.

"They aren't trying to sell me anything, other than the service of working with my information and giving a detailed prescription back," he says.

VALUE IN THE DATA

Before a farmer provides information to a company or consulting firm — never to recapture that information again — it's important to weigh the benefits and potential dangers.

Bamshad Mobasher, professor in the

John Rutherford

School of Computing, DePaul University, says predictive analytics can be a valuable tool in a variety of situations.

"This collection of techniques and statistical approaches utilizes computing, statistics and data mining to sift through large amounts of data and find patterns that may not be visible to the naked eye, and use them to make better decisions," he says. "We can build models to predict future behavior. This applies to weather, purchasing patterns and even search engine results."

And as Robert Corzatt and Tyler Rees say, it can apply to farming decisions, as well. They are founding members of Harvest-Max Partners, Washington, Iowa. Their services involve data evaluation, including fertility, soil and management practices, with the goal of helping producers increase yields and profitability.

"Many companies can write prescriptions, but what we're doing differently is