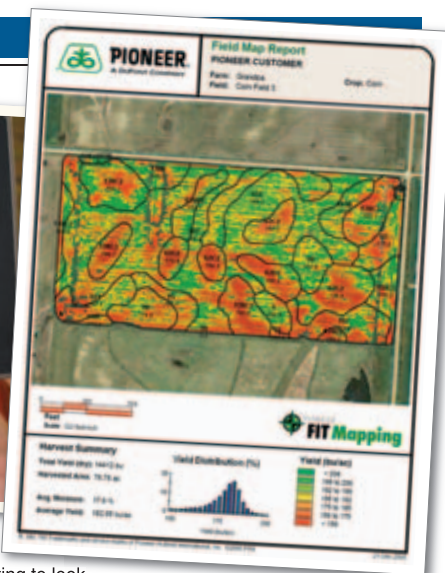


TECHNOLOGY

**ATTENTION TO PLANTING:**

Farmers are starting to look beyond harvest at the planting side of data collection as systems get more mobile. This allows use of data collection systems, with a common interface, at planting, during spraying and at harvest.

Drilling through data layers

By WILLIE VOGT

AWET spring extended 2008 planting well into May for some parts of the Midwest, but now that June has arrived and planting is winding down, there's a chance to take stock of the operation. And you may consider doing that for your data, too.

When precision farming tools first started showing up more than 15 years ago, the focus was solely on harvest. But that's changing, as farmers find it's easier to gather information. "The thing about it now is that we're getting more layers because it's getting easier for farmers to collect the data," says Kevin Anderson, manager, FarmRX LLC. The result is that today, you've probably built a healthy data pile of multi-layered information.

Anderson notes those new

Key Points

- More data layers allow more precise farm management.
- Agronomists become important as data piles up.
- Free soil maps are available for most areas nationwide.

data collecting tools — including the Case IH Pro600 controller — are more mobile. "You can move them from the tractor to the sprayer to the combine, and you can collect all those [data] layers, and it's the same push buttons so the farmer is less reluctant to collect data," he adds.

FarmRX is a limited-liability corporation based in Jackson, Minn., that handles all the day-to-day data management for three farmer cooperatives in southwest Minnesota. They are NuWay Cooperative out of Trimont, Wantonwan

Farm Service in Truman, and United Farmers Cooperative of Winthrop.

The company provides service to agronomists from all three cooperatives. The agronomists can access customer data right from the kitchen table to help farmers better manage their cropping systems.

More layers, more info

Of course, the goal of collecting more data layers is to have more information for decision-making, but once you have that data, you need to be able to drill down.

"Years ago, GIS was a big buzzword," Anderson recalls. GIS means geographic information system, and it's a process of linking information to specific spatial points; for example, nutrition, yield, soil type, planting date and crop protection spraying all can be linked to specific latitude and longitude positions on your farm.

Anderson notes that while GIS got a lot of attention early on, today's farmer already has enough to learn about his operation, adding that the skill set needed to use GIS for management is not desirable.

"We're just finding with our growers that with more and more management, GIS is something they would rather let someone else handle," he notes. "They want someone else to run and go over the results in a concise format."

That raises the role of cooperative agronomists since they can spend the time interpreting the data and turning that into information that allows a farmer to say, "Yes, do that" or "No, let's do this." And as more data piles up from different sources, this service could grow in importance.

One area getting more attention for 2008 and beyond is variable-rate planting. Strong

commodity prices have farmers replacing equipment like never before, and they're opting for variable-rate planting control. That opens the door to creation of planting maps and gets people asking questions about how best to develop that planting strategy.

At FarmRX, Anderson explains that the partner cooperative agronomists worked closely to develop those maps for this season. The key was to look at the data available and determine if low-yielding areas needed a drop in population and if high-yielding areas needed a boost. However, to build on the data from this year's exercise, the cooperatives are adding test strips to those field areas.

For example, if the field looks as if dropping the population might be a good idea, they will set up the prescription map accordingly. Then they will insert a 2-acre test strip where the population is even lower in some areas and higher than the planted area, too. That way they can further test the impact of changing the population. It's pretty easy to do with variable-rate planting.

The 2008 season also brought a new request, Anderson says. "We had people asking us about the impact of planting date on yield based on their data," he explains. "We've only got seven years of data here, so we don't

Service offers free maps of planted fields

GETTING good maps from your collected data can be a hassle, but Pioneer, a DuPont company, has been providing free maps from its FIT Mapping Service for two years. For 2008, the company has added a new service growers might find useful: as-planted mapping. Todd Peterson, who works with emerging technologies for the seed company, explains the service will take the FIT technology for harvest maps and turn it around for use in the spring.

The as-planted map can be color-coded by the hybrid or variety planted, and that's another useful data layer when evaluating yield next fall. Learn more by visiting www.pioneer.com/growing_point or talk with your local Pioneer representative.

feel it's enough to make that recommendation, but they are asking."

Anderson says cooperative agronomists encourage farmers to talk with other experts and sources, but now they recommend another question: "Ask the data, along with others, the same question. Then use all the sources along with the data to verify which direction is the right one for the grower."

Evaluate the data you have on hand and talk with your agronomist or consultant. If you're not using all the information available, you could be missing out on ways to enhance your input use.

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CASE IH
AGRICULTURE

Add layer of soil information

GRID sampling and mapping profit zones offer useful information for crop and fertility planning on your farm, but just knowing the soil types for your operation can add value, too. And that information is easier than ever to add to your farm database. USDA and cooperating agencies embarked a few years ago on a mission to digitize their library of county soil maps. Now that those maps have been digitized, it's easier to get that information attached to your own yield and crop data.

"Scale is a big issue for in-field management," says Brian Slater, associate professor, School of Environment and Natural Resources, Ohio State University. "In many cases the county soil maps are not fine enough scale for real in-field planning, but they do provide an inventory of what you can expect to find."

Slater has worked on taking those digitized maps for Ohio and making sure the information is seamless from county to county. He notes that if a farmer has a digital terrain model of his farm and ongoing yield maps, those digitized soil maps could be useful to better understand in-field variability of results. "I think the soil survey is very valuable and can be put to use in the same databases used for precision ag planning," Slater says.

He laughs when someone mentions the "free" digitized maps now available, noting those maps were built on 100 years or more of "hard labor and the taxpayer's money. It's been paid for."

Obtain that information either from your agronomist or by visiting soildata.mart.nrcs.usda.gov online.

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