

# Shaving and saving energy costs



## Farm Energy

By DANA SCHWEITZER

**O**VER these past few years, I've written about many different ideas for managing energy more efficiently on your farm. I've summarized advice and techniques from my colleagues here in ISU Extension and Outreach that can help you rethink how, when and why your farm uses fuel, LP and electricity, and how much they cost you.

Why am I asking you to think about energy costs when today's fuel prices and corn prices are so low? Don't I know that you've got bigger issues like cropland rental rates on your plate right now? Yes, for many folks it's been a frustrating year, but here's the thing: In the long run, the variability of energy prices affects your operating costs and overall profitability just like any other input.

Fuel prices have dropped in recent months, but we all know they will rise again. Maybe not next month or even next year, but when they do creep upward, how will you react? Are you willing to consider a few small changes now that not only fit your needs, but also help your farm?

### Saving more than you think

If 2014 was a lean year for you, then don't miss this opportunity to trim energy expenses. Think about minimizing your total consumption for the long haul. The steps you take today can put you in a better position for 2015 and beyond.

The USDA Census of Ag confirms what you already know: Your farm's largest energy bill is for diesel fuel. Locking in a low contract price is typically the first step toward minimizing fuel costs, but locking in other strategies for using less total fuel may require planning.

For instant savings:

- Swap dirty tractor fuel and air filters for fresh ones to increase tractor fuel efficiency by 3% to 4%.

- When spring fieldwork begins, you can save about 15% to 35% of fuel when you shift up and throttle back during tillage or planting.

- Features like front-wheel assist or a continuously variable transmission typically improve fuel efficiency so utilize them if you've got them.

- Reducing tillage depth by just 2 inches also reduces total fuel consumption.

While you're busy with contracts this winter, pause to consider options for seed. When it comes to drying corn, selecting an early-season hybrid might be worth considering to maximize field drying and minimize bin drying.

An ISU study showed that early-season varieties were, on average, 2.5% drier than full-season varieties at harvest with no decreases in yield. When drying is unavoidable, carefully calibrate moisture sensors and monitor grain to avoid wasting fuel due to overdrying.

### Tackling energy efficiency

The USDA Census of Ag also shows that electricity expenses account for about

20% of energy bills on Iowa's farms. To conserve electricity, clean fan blades and check fan belts at grain bins, as well as fan guards, shutters or discharge cones for livestock buildings. Dirty blades and shutters can reduce air delivery by 40%, and waste electricity by constantly forcing the fan motor to work harder.

There is no single right way to tackle

energy efficiency. The point is to start by selecting a few ideas that fit well with your farmstead and then put them to work to minimize energy consumption and maximize profitability. Pick a strategy that makes sense for you and get started today!

More ideas for improving energy efficiency all around the farm are available from ISU Farm Energy at [farmenergy.exnet](http://farmenergy.exnet).

[iastate.edu](http://iastate.edu) and on Twitter @ISU\_Farm\_Energy. This month, join ISU ag engineer Mark Hanna for "Lowering Energy Costs in Crop Production" in Ames on Jan. 13, Iowa City on Jan. 28 or Carroll on Jan. 29 during the statewide Crop Advantage Series.

Schweitzer is program coordinator for ISU Farm Energy in collaboration with the Iowa Energy Center.

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