

Highlights of the 2009 Top Farmer Crop Workshop

by Bruce Erickson

The business climate and world economic situation surrounding the 2009 Top Farmer Crop Workshop was much different than in 2008. But while margins for crop producers have retreated sharply from last year's highs, it was clear at this year's workshop that many of the critical issues for row crop farmers did not change—having a working strategy in place to guide fundamental farm decisions such as expansion or shifts in enterprises, effectively managing risk, staying on top of new technologies, and utilizing the opinions of other farmers in similar situations to test ideas and evaluate options.

“I enjoyed the financial aspects of this workshop the most,” said attendee John Kent. “While other meetings I attend focus more on how to grow and manage crops, this workshop intertwines that with the all-important aspect of managing the business.” John was one of a dozen first-time attendees at the workshop, and there were plenty of veterans there as well. Sam Swinford, a farmer from Flat Rock, Indiana, has attended all 42. Attendance was up from last year, and included farmers from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Australia, Argentina, and a slate of over 50 presenters.

The workshop starts on Sunday evening, and the first presentation was from a face familiar to many, Arkansas ag economist Terry Griffin. A farmer's evaluation of hybrids, fertilizers, or other crop management practices is important to help guide future decisions. Yield monitor information has largely replaced the use of weigh wagons or running loads across a scale for on-farm testing, but Terry tells us that more attention needs to be paid to the correct analysis and interpretation of yield monitor data if valid comparisons are to be made.

This year's Monday morning session tackled many of the business issues from the start, with Texas A & M's Danny Klinefelter discussing his “Twelve Best Management Practices” to help producers shape their strategic management. Danny reminded us that in a competitive market, survival depends on continuous improvement at a pace to stay ahead of the pack, and that successful producers anticipate, adapt to, and capitalize on change.

An interesting diversion to the financial topics at the workshop was Monday's panel discussion on electronic social networks for farmers. Farmers often pride themselves in their independence, but most are intricately networked in their local communities and many connect regularly with acquaintances sharing common interests often counties or states away. So might there be any business purpose in investing effort in setting up a blog, having a Facebook page, or staying connected via Twitter? While the



Teaching assistants guide farmers as they try new scenarios and interpret the results using Purdue's PC-LP linear programming model at the 2009 workshop.



original intent of this session was looking at electronic networking farmer to farmer, some producers are hoping to communicate with a much broader audience. Pork producer Randy Curless aims to connect to non-farm neighbors to build trust in how meat protein is produced, an important task with an increasingly skeptical public. George Kakasuleff farms on the urban fringe, and hopes to build bridges amongst his non-farming neighbors—including why they need to spray herbicides or apply fertilizers, why they must sometimes work long into the night near their neighbor’s residences, why there are placards at some field entrances. These farmers are changing paradigms for agricultural producers, who in the past may have tried to stay below the radar but now feel obligated to purposely fly right into it.



Purdue Extension Field Crops Disease Specialist Kiersten Wise discusses current issues during the Monday afternoon sessions at the Purdue agronomy farm.

Technology evaluation is always a key part of Top Farmer, and Monday afternoon’s sessions at the farm explored several areas, including seed treatments, sprayers, and grain management systems. Automated steering has been one of the largest growth areas in crop production technology. Chad Pfitzer’s Tuesday morning presentation gave us a glimpse into the future of guidance systems: they are

set to rapidly advance in complexity and intensity, and will open doors to new possibilities of precise field operations that could improve input efficiency and enhance crop yields. Newer systems such as CORS and VRS will complement current correction sources such as RTK clusters.

If there’s one word that may have caused the most stress for farmers in the past year it was this—fertilizer. Speaker Dan Frick ought to know, as he’s both a wholesaler and a dealer, and readily admits this was a very difficult



The financial panel discussion led by Mike Boehlje at the Beck Agricultural Center.



market to read in the last year. Dan discussed the fundamentals that drove prices and supplies in 2008/2009 and our current situation, but of greater interest to the audience was in what Dan had to say about fertilizer contracts, options, and swaps—tools to allow both retailers and farmers to help deal with what has become a considerable source of risk to their operations.

A first for Top Farmer was a live two-way audio/video interaction with soybean contest winner Kip Cullers from Missouri. Kip confessed he preferred working with corn as opposed to soybeans, but shared some of his agronomic practices that he feels embellish his soybean yields—including twin rows, and imposing stresses on the soybeans at certain points in the growing season. With the table microphone system in the Deans Auditorium the questions and answers flowed freely, and Kip appeared to be right next door as he spoke from the large screens at the front of the auditorium. Workshop participants made it clear they want more of this communication technology at future events—and can envision a whole new crop of Top Farmer presenters “beamed in” from all over the world.

