

Top Farmer Workshop Provides a Forum for Improved Decision-Making

by Bruce Erickson

Profits from intensive soybean production, weed management in Roundup Ready corn, ownership of ethanol plants, RTK networks and many other crop management topics are on the agenda at the 2006 Top Farmer Crop Workshop, July 16-19, on the Purdue University Campus, West Lafayette, Indiana (<http://www.agecon.purdue.edu/topfarmer/conference.asp>).

The Top Farmer Crop Workshop is one of the longest-running agricultural programs in the country, this being its 39th year. According to coordinator Jess Lowenberg-DeBoer, “the workshop is unique in that it not only brings producers together in a forum to compare ideas, but also allows each producer to test their ideas in the context of their unique farming setup using the linear programming model.” Along with the interaction and programming runs at this year’s workshop will be over 50 presenters, always a blend of expertise from the academic, ag industry, and production sides of the business.



*Workshop Coordinator
Jess Lowenberg-DeBoer*

The workshop begins on Sunday evening July 16, kicked off by Shawn Conley, Purdue Extension Soybean Specialist. Shawn has just completed a survey of his clientele, a practice more common with a business trying to better understand its marketplace than an extension agronomist, and the results are interesting. Among the 1300 respondents, larger farming operations tended to plant their soybeans earlier and reported higher yields than smaller farming operations. As an average, growers were planting a full week earlier than they were ten years prior. Grower management practices were consistent with university recommendations, with one notable exception--while Purdue University recommends a planting depth of 0.75 to 1.5 inches, most growers were not planting in this range. These and other findings will provide a base for discussing the role of soybeans in Corn Belt farming operations, and how they can best be managed to maximize returns.



Illinois ethanol plant.

photo courtesy Lincolnland Agri-Energy, LLC

While some are talking soybeans, others are concerned with growing more corn for a hungry ethanol market. Ethanol plants are popping up like weeds across the Midwest—but the ownership of ethanol production is changing, according to Joe Needham, VP Grain Division, The Andersons, who speaks Monday morning. Many farmers have invested in ethanol production in past years. But outside investors have now seen the profit potential in ethanol, so are more commonly providing the funding. Also driving



corporate investment is that newer plants are bigger and need to start turning dollars quickly, often exceeding the capabilities of farmer consortiums that can take time to organize and secure funding.

High energy prices have driven many decisions this spring, but Indiana farmer Mike Shuter has been energy efficient for many years. Mike has always been comfortable at the cusp of the innovation curve, one of the first to begin no-tilling his corn in 1993, and then going all no-till in his corn and soybeans in 1998. In 2004, Mike began strip tilling his corn acres with the assistance of a GPS guidance system. Mike's news this year, though, is his cropping shift from a corn/soybean rotation to a corn/corn/soybean rotation. More grain volume required a change in harvesting capacity, so for the first time this fall Shuter Sunset Farms will not own a combine—Machinery Link will deliver a leased model to the farm in time for harvest.

Roundup-Ready corn is helping Mike Shuter make the shift to more corn in his operation, part of a significant move to more post-emerge weed control in the Eastern Corn Belt. Purdue Weed Scientist Bill Johnson will present some of his recent research Tuesday that shows that corn reacts differently than soybeans to early weed pressures—and thus, early-season management may need to

be handled differently. In addition, weeds can tie up considerable amounts of nitrogen, with the effect that crop yields can be dramatically affected.



Farm Management Specialist Alan Miller discusses the ramifications of management choices with Illinois farmer Brian Sierens during the 2005 workshop

More and more farmers are incorporating guidance systems into their operations. But to some, the learning and economic curves are still too steep. Ohio farmer Dusty Sonnenberg and his neighbors banded resources and built (with a little help) their own RTK network, which can provide precise positioning information for guidance at a much lower cost than each farmer owning their own base station. Rusty will share his GPS knowledge on Tuesday afternoon, and will also be part of a guidance panel discussion that will follow his presentation.

Networking is also important to Iowa farmer Kevin Green, but will tell you during the Wednesday morning session that one of his most important networks is his landowners. Greenview Farms maintains an office in town, easily accessible to landowners. They also communicate via newsletters and personal visits, keeping landowners in the decision loops as much as possible so he and his landowners share common ground. Kevin's farm operation has grown considerably since he attended his first Top Farmer Crop Workshop in 1984. "When you look at the price of other professional meetings, the workshop is a real bargain at \$250. I can attribute much of my farming success to the information and interaction that occurred through my participation over the years."

Information about all of the 50+ speakers at the 2006 program can be found at <http://www.agecon.purdue.edu/topfarmer/conference.asp>. We look forward to seeing you in July!

