HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2005 TOP FARMER CROP WORKSHOP
by Bruce Erickson

A fast-moving, diverse mix of speakers, yet with time designated to interact with other growers who are dealing with similar management decisions has kept Top Farmer a regular summer event for many growers. But the 2005 workshop drew a record number of first-time participants. Albert Peterson, his father William Peterson and Uncle Bernard Peterson benefited from the presentations and the interaction, but also the ability to test management decisions on their farm using Purdue’s analysis program.

“We thought the program was quite comprehensive—from agronomy, to alternative crops, risk management, and agricultural policy,” said Albert Peterson. “The workshop gave me a lot of new ideas, and also allowed us to take an objective look back at our farming operation, to make sure we’re properly tooled for the inevitable challenges of the coming years.”

It is difficult to encapsulate a program that includes nearly 60 presentations. Sunday evening’s program was highlighted by participant interaction inspired by farmer Mike Ellis, who along with two brothers own 2200 acres in Kentucky and rent 5000 more. They’ve cultivated relationships with 37 landlords in two counties, own 225,000 bushels of grain storage and have worked hard to improve their farms, but now are working toward a planned, orderly retirement. They’d like to see some value in the system they have in place—yet, when farm assets change hands, usually there is little value placed upon their collective worth—what is termed the “going concern value”, a value well beyond the physical assets common in many other businesses. Participants challenged each other to estimate the going concern value of their own farming operations.

A foundation of the Top Farmer experience is in testing management decisions before they are put into place. Top Farmer offers the B21 linear programming model for testing decisions about equipment size, crop rotation and farm size. For the second year Top Farmer offered to opportunity for analysis of yield monitor data for hybrid and variety choices and on-farm testing of new agronomic practices. Jess Lowenberg-DeBoer, workshop coordinator, and Howard Doster, the emeritus coordinator, proposed that Top Farmer participants use spatial analysis methods developed at Purdue to share yield monitor data to speed up response to new technology. Anyone interested in pooling yield monitor data for planned comparisons should contact Lowenberg-DeBoer (lowenbej@purdue.edu).

The 2005 B21 “base case” focused on constraints to shifting from rotation corn to long term continuous corn systems. The base case suggested that because of the higher cost of growing continuous corn, it must yield substantially more than rotation corn to be economical. An informal show of hands revealed that many participants are raising at least some continuous corn. Back to back presentations by Mark Dempsey, Illinois farmer and national NCGA contest runner-up and Tony Vyn, a Purdue Agronomist, revealed contrasting opinions. It is hard to deny that Dempsey has had great success with his continuous corn system, last year producing Illinois’ highest NCGA yield, and also reporting that his fields are holding very well in this year’s low-rainfall stress. Still, Vyn’s continuous corn system over 30 years and multiple locations showed little encouragement to producers wanting to capitalize on the high-end yield potential of corn or realize greater benefits from expanding local ethanol or livestock enterprises.

High fertilizer prices continue to cause growers consternation regarding crop nutrient decisions, and leading Monday afternoon’s session was a discussion about how Iowa farmers are working together doing on-farm testing to answer their crop management questions. One of the primary efforts there will continue to be the

Tracy Blackmer discusses the on-farm testing programs that he coordinates through the Iowa Soybean Association.
most efficient use of nitrogen, offering both economic and environmental benefits, reported Tracy Blackmer, who heads those efforts as Research Director of the Iowa Soybean Association.

The Top Farmer Workshop has a history of being a launching point for innovation, and participants were treated to a flight of the Purdue College of Aeronautics and Astronautics’ High Altitude Airship at Monday evening’s session at the Agronomy Center for Research and Education. This helium-filled platform, funded by the U.S. Air Force Research Laboratory, is designed to float at high altitudes for months, with potential applications in crop monitoring, security surveillance, and weather forecasting. Equally technical but more “down to earth” were demonstrations of a twin-row planting system from Great Plains Manufacturing, the adaptable E-Z Steer GPS guided technology from Ag Leader, and a narrow-row corn head provided by Calmer Cornheads.

Earlier dry weather over much of the eastern Corn Belt has contributed to extreme corn rootworm concerns for many growers, according to Kevin Steffey, Extension Entomologist at the University of Illinois. Steffey’s Tuesday presentation answered questions regarding the efficacy of genetic and seed treatment insect control options, which more and more growers are adopting in lieu of traditional planter-applied granular or liquid insecticides.

With all of the emphasis on corn, where do soybeans fit in the cropping mix? If Purdue soybean specialist Shawn Conley has his way, soybeans are not going to take a back seat to corn, and he offered suggestions for tweaking early-season and late-season management decisions. Look for a greater emphasis on soybean systems in future Top Farmer programming. Tuesday’s session closed with an animated exchange between Purdue ag economists Mike Boehlje and Allan Gray regarding the future of Midwest grain operations. New business models, government policy, and managerial capacity will determine how quickly grain operations consolidate, a factor that has already happened in livestock. Wednesday morning featured the popular marketing panel, where analysts Dennis Alkire, Richard Brock, and Alan Brugler agreed to disagree on positions related to grains and energy.

While the Petersons left Purdue with more information than they came with, perhaps their greatest gains were from some of their farm management analyses. “We ran several analyses during the workshop, and we’re planning to run more to look at how feasible some alternative field operations might be,” says Albert Peterson. “As competitive as grain farming can be, any improvement in production, efficiency, or risk management can make a big difference in our long-term outlook.” The 39th Top Farmer Crop Workshop will be held July 23-26, 2006.