Highlights of the 2006 Top Farmer Crop Workshop
by Bruce Erickson

Jules Willott has been attending the Top Farmer Crop Workshop since the mid-1970’s. “I attend two big agricultural meetings per year, and this is usually one of them. At Top Farmer, you hear about things here a year or two before you might otherwise.” But Willott, of Mexico, MO, says there is a downside to attending as well. “I must admit, it takes me a few days after I get home to get everything all sorted out in my head again.”

This year’s workshop followed the format that has kept attendees returning year after year—a slate of many short, to-the-point presentations, with speaker and participant interaction programmed in. The new campus location seemed to stimulate even more interaction among speakers and attendees, with excellent visibility and sound quality.

Sunday afternoon’s activities included special sessions for first-time attendees, to orient them to the linear programming decision-assisting capabilities that have also been a staple at Top Farmer. Following that evening was a discussion regarding contingency planning—how will things carry on (or not) in your farming operation if you are suddenly unable to manage? Many farms today are huge enterprises, but many also still tend to hinge around the guidance and knowledge of a key individual or two—making them especially vulnerable. Knowledge of lease arrangements, ownership of stored grain, succession plans, etc. are often not recorded. The evening ended by participants sharing their experiences and challenging each other regarding their own contingency plans.

Kicking off the Monday morning session was Illinois farmer Kelly Robertson, who has a graduate degree in plant and soil science but claims many a lesson earned the hard way as well. Kelly was one of the first in his area to purchase a yield monitor, then in 1995 added GPS and made his first field maps. “I was a genius that first year and of course had all of the answers—but then came 1996’s maps which proved me an idiot, and in ’97 I was even more so.” In the last ten years Kelly has worked with grid sampling and VRT fertilization, EM38, Veris, RTK networks, variable rate corn populations, N stabilizers, field drainage. He is now Agronomy Manager with Rubenacker Farms, a large southern Illinois operation, in addition to managing his own farming operation. With all of this information and analysis there isn’t much that slips past Kelly’s reach—and therein he thinks is one of the keys to success—to use that information to model the crop’s environment, and then to find the payback by acting upon it.

Moe Russell is president of Russell Consulting Group, working with farmers across the Midwest to assist them in increasing their profitability, reducing risk, and easing some of the strain that comes with the occupation. Russell sees an increasing gap among producers in their attitude, skills, knowledge, and profitability. He identifies production, financial management, and marketing
management as three critical tasks, and says it is difficult to be good at all three—thus advises to keep working and getting better at those things you like to do, but recognize when you aren’t good at something and hire that done.

Following Monday evening’s barbeque was a demonstration of agricultural robots by University of Illinois Ag Engineer Tony Grift, who is working on platforms that could be assigned a number of tasks, such as detecting insects or diseases, applying pesticides, or even pulling weeds. Robots are common in factories, where there is a controlled environment and tasks are repeatable. But crop fields are anything but predictable. Yet ten years ago, who would have thought we would now be so heavily into guidance systems—will the robots soon be coming to a field near you?

Al Groth is a conventional mid-sized farmer by all outside appearances—but in the last two years his operation has evolved into something far from typical, as he now supplies much of the feed and manages the manure from a new 1200-cow dairy. Groth discussed in Tuesday’s session how partnering with a dairy seemed to be the answer to adding value for Groth Farms, Winchester, IN. Groth gets the benefit of the manure from the dairy to fertilize his crops, and there is no grain storage and hauling, reducing expenses. Alfalfa in the rotation benefits other crops. Groth is pleased with his arrangement but is also quick to add that there are considerations, such local opposition to confined feeding operations, more planning and recordkeeping requirements, and increased labor requirements.

Most larger farms depend on some non-family help get the work done, and managing these employees can be a considerable challenge. Sarah Fogleman, Kansas State Ag Economist related some words of wisdom from a farmer she knows in Tuesday afternoon’s session. “I don’t worry about hiring a great employee and having him leave in 3 months. I worry about hiring a terrible employee and having him stay 30 years!” Fogleman said that there are four core dimensions in keeping employees content—autonomy, variety, task identity, and feedback—and feedback is the only dimension in which the employer has total control. Wednesday morning included the popular marketing panel, where Purdue Ag Economist Chris Hurt umpired while Bryce Knorr, Darrel Good, and Robert Utterback provided points and counterpoints regarding grain and energy markets.

It may have been the 39th annual workshop, but it was the first for Gretchen Yeo, who drove over from Lowellville, OH, and just the second for Jason Lay, Bloomington, IL. Says Lay, “I like the ‘to the point’ format covering a broad range of topics delivered by the leaders in research and industry. I definitely will be back next year.” For Yeo, there is a lot of work to be done at home before considering next year’s program. “The workshop forced me to think out of the box of my own operations,” she says. “Now, the challenge is squarely on me to see how I will turn this into results for Yeo Farms.” The 40th workshop will be held July 22-25, 2007.