

**Editor's
Notebook**



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Boost Profits By Doing Less?

Most corn and soybean growers are spending more on weed control than the weeds would cost them in lost yield, reported a recent issue of *Farm & Country*.

The magazine interviewed Clarence Swanton at the University of Guelph who thinks farmers have started relying too heavily on herbicides. His research shows that many could cut back on weed control without compromising yields or profits. "If your fields are sidewalk clean, you're spending too much on weed control," he says.

In research on how many weeks it takes to produce a 5 percent yield cut - which is about what it takes to pay for and apply the average herbicide - Swanton has found the time of weed emergence is more important than the number of weeds that emerge.

In corn, for instance, it only takes a single pigweed every 6 ft. of row to cut yields by 5 percent if the pigweed emerges when the corn is in the 3-leaf stage. If pigweed doesn't emerge until the corn is in the 6-leaf stage, it takes four weeds per every 3 ft. to cut yields 5 percent. If the pigweed doesn't emerge until the 9-leaf stage, it will never compete with the crop.

The bottom line is that Swanton thinks some farmers have focused too heavily on weeds and lost sight of the end goal - profit. Studies have been done all over North America on how and when weeds affect yields and that substantial savings can be realized by limiting weed control efforts to only the most critical times.

Red River Valley Trouble

Bad news is not what we're accustomed to hearing out of the fertile Red River Valley area of North Dakota and Northern Minnesota. But the combination of flood damage and crop failure due to wheat scab had many farmers scrambling for financing this spring. Some failed and our good friend Dave Ryden, Jr. of Ryden Development says there were 48 farm auctions in one week recently within a 60 miles radius of their farm-based manufacturing shop near Hallock, Minn. "It's sad what's been happening to many farmers in this area. In most cases, it's not their fault. Nature has been tough on us the past couple years," he says.

No Pay-Off Yet For Precision Farming

Site-specific farming does not increase profits significantly, according to an extensive economic analysis of precision farming.

It does, however, appear to reduce a farmer's risk for having a poor crop, Purdue University researchers found.

The study examined site-specific farming operations on six farms in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan between 1993 and 1995. It studied fertilizer application on corn, soybeans and wheat, comparing the traditional method of putting the same amount of fertilizer over an entire field with a variable application based on a soil sampling grid.

All other management practices were the same. The study

found that for whole-field or traditional management, the average return per acre was \$147.

For soil-type site-specific management, the average return was \$148 per acre.

There were, however, significant differences in variability. For example:

- Whole-field management yields varied from \$35 to \$312 per acre, or a spread of \$277.
- For soil-type management, yields varied from \$57 to \$238 per acre, or a spread of \$181.

While site-specific management for fertilizer rates didn't increase profits, it didn't cost any more either, the researchers noted.

"If the site-specific technology is also used for herbicide rates, lime and nitrogen application, in addition to P and K application, the technology costs would be spread over more inputs so then it could become a profitable system," said Purdue economist Jess Lowenberg-DeBoer.

"Square-Wheeled" Bike

A "square-wheeled" bike was recently taken for a ride by a Minnesota math professor.

Prof. Stan Wagon of Macalester College, St. Paul, Minn., demonstrated his eye-catching bike to students and media. The square wheels are designed to run on a special wooden track with arches spaced 12 in. apart.

The arches allow the bike's two 15-in. sq. plywood front wheels to ride smoothly along just like a round wheel on the ground. The edges of the wood wheels are covered with glued-on tire treads.

The frame of the bike remains level as the wheels go over the arches, Wagon notes.

The principal behind the rolling square wheels was discovered about 40 years ago. Wagon took on the challenge of actually demonstrating the theory as a project for one of his math classes. "It was simply a lot more interesting than looking at a book full of mathematical equations," he explains.

There may be some practical applications for the phenomenon. For example, Wagon says a number of years ago an inventor used the square wheel principal to build a hand drill that would make square holes. "I saw a pamphlet on it many years ago but I don't know if it's still on the market."

One thing is for sure: This first-of-its-kind bike will never be stopped by a flat tire.

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Where There's Smoke, There's Lawyers

It's time for a reality check regarding proposed legal settlements between the government and big tobacco companies, says a Tennessee farmer who fears tobacco farmers will be hard hit while trial lawyers make a killing.

Laurence "Buck" Teeter farms 2,000 acres near Clarksville, Tenn., growing corn, wheat, soybeans, vegetables and 150 acres of tobacco, which nets him up to \$1,000 per acre annually. The 58-year-old sixth generation grower says proposed settlements between tobacco companies and the federal government may drive his family and others like them out of farming altogether.

"We've been growing tobacco continuously since my family came here from Virginia in 1809," says Teeter. "The Burley and dark-fired tobacco we grow is equivalent, income-wise, to 3,000 acres of corn, wheat and soybeans.

"Meanwhile, federal, state and local taxes collected off my crop alone total \$7.5 million a year. To put that in perspective, figuring 5,000 tobacco plants per acre, that's \$20 in taxes raised from each plant I grow. The proposed settlement is going to raise total taxes collected from my crop by at least an additional \$5 million a year.

"Tobacco is being legislated out of business, while we still have a substantial investment in equipment, including 11 curing barns valued at \$750,000 and a Burley harvester we paid \$100,000 for. They'll be useless under the settlement, and there's a good chance that my two sons and daughter

will have to find work elsewhere."

But the real kicker, Teeter says, is this:

"There are approximately 300 to 400 lawyers representing 41 states in this case and they'll net \$2.5 billion a year in contingency fees over the 25-year life of the settlement. That's five times more than the income of the 125,000 U.S. tobacco farmers, whose combined net income is \$500 million a year."

Life's Lessons

- Before filing something, remember: 80 percent of everything filed is never referred to again.
- A happy customer customer usually tells three other people. An unhappy one tells 11.
- The percentage of Americans who say they trust government to do what's right has gone from more than 75 percent in 1964 to less than 25 percent today.
- Job interview? Schedule it in the morning. Studies have shown that companies are 83 percent more likely to hire a.m. job seekers.
- The average American spends 49 hours in a lifetime seeing doctors and 64 hours waiting to see them.
- Fifty percent of loans made to family members are never repaid; at least 75 percent of those made to friends are also unpaid.

Ethanol Strikes Out In Peoria

The bus system in Peoria, Ill., recently announced its decision to stop using ethanol in its bus fleet despite the fact that the city's located right in the middle of farm country.



Converting ethanol-burning engines back to diesel is expected to cost about \$10,000 per bus. The decision to make the move was based mainly on the higher cost of ethanol and the ethanol-burning bus engines, as well as the higher cost of maintaining the engines, according to Steve Tarter, a spokesman for the Greater Peoria Mass Transit District.

Peoria paid 79 cents per gal. for ethanol while diesel was 60 to 65 cents, Tarter said. Since buses use about twice as much ethanol as diesel, the actual cost was closer to \$1.60 per gal., he said.

"Plus, if we needed a part, such as a fuel pump, having a one-of-a-kind engine meant we had to wait and wait for the part, while the bus just sat there," Tarter said. The buses were equipped with prototype 270 hp Detroit diesel V6 92TA engines.

On a more positive note, ethanol reduced air pollution and Peoria will continue to use it as an additive, possibly in a 10 percent blend, he said.

Transit system figures showed that using ethanol reduced particulate emissions in the air by some 12 1/2 percent and nitrogen oxide, linked to smog and acid rain, by 47 percent.

The five-year Peoria experiment was one of 32 analyzed by the National Center for Alternative Fuels at West Virginia University. Other transit agencies, including Los Angeles and one of the bus systems in New York City, are also returning to all-diesel fleets because of the cost, according to the center. (C.F. Marley)

Ode To A Best Friend

- If you can start the day without caffeine,
 - If you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
 - If you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles,
 - If you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it,
 - If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time,
 - If you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you, when through no fault of yours, something goes wrong,
 - If you can take criticism and blame without resentment,
 - If you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him,
 - If you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend,
 - If you can face the world without lies and deceit,
 - If you can relax without liquor,
 - If you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
 - If you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion or politics,
 - Then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog!
- (Anonymous)