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NEW LOCAL PILOT PROJECT ON CARBON

I am currently serving on a committee studying carbon and energy use in agriculture. Committee members include myself, extension educator Paul Hay, Corn Growers Association, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Bunge Milling, and Kellogg. The steering committee is discussing carbon footprint from field-to-market.

I believe, in the future, there will be more emphasis on green brand communication, increasing consumer-facing “green” products, and heightened attention in sustainable brands or what I call “Eco-labeling.” Price and quality have always been driving factors of our food supply. The new consumer issue being kicked around is being climate friendly. New labeling is beginning to work into the marketplace. For instance, Walmart has plans for certain “green” initiatives in the future and wholesalers want to continue to keep their market share.

For the carbon footprint project, Bunge Milling will ask growers to participate in a kick-off meeting the end of February at the Crete Mills. Growers will learn why participating in a field-to-market project is important. The producer survey will have specific questions that will allow the company to study their carbon footprint back to the corn seed that is planted each spring.

The new survey will be important to study the range of carbon use per bushel of corn being raised. Inputs such as fuel, seed, fertilizer, chemicals and machinery passes all add to the carbon load. Of large interest is any documentation over the years if carbon levels in soils (organic matter) is increasing.

The milling industry has really changed over the years by enhancing quality with new technologies and delivering multiple products to users with very specific specifications. Growers will also learn about a new project sourcing specific corn hybrids in 2010 and 2011. Currently, the mill purchases #2 yellow corn and does not pay a specific incentive for specific hybrids.

The carbon survey is an attempt to learn more about a product system throughout its life cycle and the inputs and outputs of an agriculture food industry process. The assessment is kind of a “cradle-to-grave” analysis that quantifies the environmental impact of a process.

Since 2003, many growers in our community already have participated in the Chicago Climate Exchange contracts and continuous no-till farming practices. It is an excellent area to survey for the field-to-market study.

Several trends are emerging in agriculture. Importantly, production agriculture has become increasingly efficient, relying on fewer inputs to produce more. However, many are recognizing there are significant challenges ahead in meeting global demand in a sustainable manner.

Living and working in this community for 27 years, I have seen huge improvements in increasing corn yields with lower inputs, decreasing soil loss, improving water management and implementing conservation practices such as no-till farming. Producers participating in the Crete Mills survey, learning more about carbon labeling and carbon footprint, is a new step

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