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TRACKING SUSTAINABILITY IN AGRICULTURE

One of the factors that is changing today is how many American consumers, especially the millennial generation, are asking questions about their food and agricultural products we produce. Today many American consumers want to be sure that their food and agriculture products are more environmentally friendly. Many producers proclaim their products and production methods are “sustainable” but there is this question of proving it. How can we measure and track sustainability in agriculture? Sustainability, what does that even mean?

When I first met the former vice president of Bunge, Fred Luckey, in 2010, with a pilot group of corn producers from Saline County, who were supplying corn to the Crete Mill, I think Fred said it best. It isn’t to say that everyone isn’t always trying to do the best that they can, but to think we are doing everything perfect and there is nothing more to learn; well that’s just foolish. So if we think about sustainability in agriculture as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, in this sense, sustainability is not a destination but a process of learning and action (i.e. continuous improvement).

With corn, soybeans and wheat in Nebraska, the Field to Market Fieldprint® Calculator is recognized as a gold-standard measurement and tracking tool, enabling farmers to measure and report how their production of crops is becoming more sustainable. In its present form, there is no question it needs to be more user friendly.

In the seven workshops I was involved with last week, teaching the Fieldprint® Calculator tool, 42 producers learned how to make their first “fieldprints” to benchmark a field representative of their operation. Our promise was to make a report back to these producers with comparisons with their peers by January 10, 2016. As a result of these workshops, several “bugs” were discovered and our team reported this to Field to Market staff and fixes are in the works. What’s important is the continuous improvement in the tool as a result of Nebraska Extension’s involvement. We care about the science and metrics being used.

One way to increase sustainability is further crop yield increases. More crop per drop, more crop per ounce of fertilizer, more crop with less soil erosion and less energy involved and more crop with future soil carbon gains.

New Soybean Project: There is a new project with the UNL Department of Agronomy and Horticulture and UNL Extension, a state-wide project aimed at generating some baseline producer data on current soybean management practices in Nebraska’s irrigated and dryland production systems. This project is funded by the Nebraska Soybean Board and the North Central Soybean Research Program (NCSR). The project goal is to identify the key factors that preclude the State’s soybean producers from obtaining yields that should be potentially possible on their respective individual farms. The term used for the difference between what yield is possible on your farm each year and what actually is achieved is called a “Yield Gap”. I will be contacting some area soybean producers to participate.



It's back to Fred Luckey's statement on to think there isn't more to learn is foolish. Our goal is to use in-depth analysis of the data farmers supply on soybean fields to identify key areas that are causing yield gaps. Could we discover some production system factors that are holding back current soybean yields?

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