

# The On-Farm Network can help you sleep better

**I**t's 4 a.m. Lightning in the distance wakes me from a deep slumber. During the low rumble of thunder that follows it, I go through the usual mental checklist: Did I close the shed? Are the combine drains out? Did I put the lid on that bin? They said a 20 percent chance. And so on.

All during the year it's always the same. I wake in the middle of the night – for whatever reason – and automatically go through the current checklist, which changes with the seasons.

Being a farmer is challenging, but for most of us, there is no other profession that rewards with such personal satisfaction. Every year, we strive to do better than last year, always looking for improvements in what we buy and what we do on our farms. We weigh the risks and explore the facts. This is the reason the Iowa Soybean Association developed its extensive Agronomic and Environmental Programming.

I have been involved with precision farming techniques since the mid-1990s, and while I knew it was allowing me to gather valuable data, I always felt it was worthless unless I asked the right questions. My work with the On-Farm Network™ has guided me in asking the right questions, and then helped me use the data I collected on my farm to get the answers I need.

This year, I am participating in a fungicide trial, an inoculant trial, and an innovative low nitrogen rate trial. To me, my whole farm is a test plot now. Since participating in my first trials four years ago, I have adjusted nitrogen application rates and timing, moved into higher value crops, lowered most of my input costs, and have gotten the value out of my precision farming investment.

Although initial funding for this program comes every year from the soybean checkoff, ISA staff has been able to leverage your checkoff dollars with funds and in-kind support from a number of other sources. The upshot is, these programs are available to all Iowa farmers who want to participate.

How do you get started? Do you need huge investments to do this on your farm? My combine had only a yield monitor when I began. ISA can help through aerial photography and GPS guided stalk sampling. They can help lay out strip tests and, because of the support they receive from agribusiness, they might even be able to supply some of the product. All you need is a yield monitor, GPS, and a desire to answer the questions on your own farm.

In this changing economy, it only makes sense to make the best economic use of inputs in our farming operations. Knowing how we affect our environment is also important for the long-term health of our families and our farm. The ISA environmental and agronomic programs have given me the tools I need to start exploring that on my farm. After four years, I'm beginning to understand the changes I must make to operate an environmentally and economically sound crop production business.

Working with the ISA Environmental and Agronomic programs has helped me eliminate a few things off that mental checklist when I wake up in the middle of the night. Maybe I can squeeze in another hour of sleep.



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