4 Easy Steps to Successfully Organize Your Cropping Records

There are 4 steps that can help you organize your cropping records. None of them cost very much and all of them can make a substantial difference in your ultimate success.

Whether you are considering buying new equipment with "as applied" data collection, selecting a software program, using a spreadsheet or creating a paper system, these 4 actions will serve you well for a long time:

- **Implement a strong Field ID system.** Use unique field ID numbers and good maps.

- **Create a list of goals.** What are the most important things a good records system will do?

- **Be realistic.** Allocate time and make the commitment.

- **Do something.** Be ready for technology, but don't expect it to replace the fundamentals.

Number your Fields and get good maps.

Most Field ID systems are at best an evolved, amalgamation of methods, and at worst, non-existent.

The purpose of field ID is for all the right folks to be able to communicate about fields clearly, accurately, and easily. Good field ID should be thrifty to enter in a PC, iPad, phone, tractor screen, on a work list, print on a map, or even scribble on a scrap of paper. Good field ID will be able to be written the exact same way on every soil test you submit for the same field, even three years later, and be able to be read reliably by the lab to give you the correct results.

Communication is more difficult now than ever. You likely have more fields, and more people who work on your farm and more people who work off your farm to communicate with about your fields.

Use a unique number for every field. Avoid letters. If you only use numbers it's easier to read them because there are only 10 possibilities for each character; 0-9. If you add letters to the mix there would be 36 possibilities to interpret (26 letters and 10 numerals). Additionally, if you are working toward using a computer, smart phone, or tablet as part of your organization, you can operate these from the numeric keypad and do not need to be able to touch type to efficiently enter field ID.

Note: don't try to use FSA numbers. Over the years fields get combined, split, and reconfigured in just about every way possible and you will only get frustrated trying to use the FSA system for field management. (This doesn't mean that your organizational effort can't allow for keeping track of the FSA numbers on your fields.)

Avoid the use of words in field ID. Bringing spelling into the communication arena provides an exponential opportunity for error. Your system can include a farm name along with a unique number. It can be handy to have a separate identifier for farm name so that you can make lists of fields that are associated with a certain farm. But, a farm name doesn't need to be part of the actual field ID.

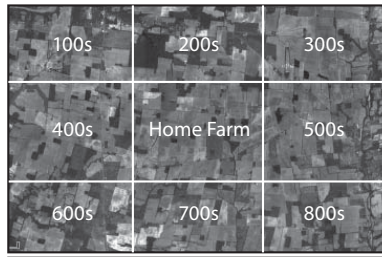There are many ways to assign numbers, and whichever you use keep in mind that you

Figure 1. Example of a field identification system that is organized and easy to follow.

won't run out of numbers. Leave room in your numbering system to add fields.

Consider a geographic scheme (see figure 1). Imagine being above your farm, looking down on your all of your fields. Now super impose a four line grid. I think of the center box being the home farm and if there were 40 fields we would number them 1-40. The upper left section (North West) would be the 100 series and if there were 11 fields in that section they would be numbered 101-111. The due north section would be the 200s, and if there were 6 fields in that section, they would be 201-206. Now, just work your way around the sections ending up with all of your fields numbered between 1 center, and the 800s in the South East Corner. This way you end up with lots of room to add fields, and you know a bit about the location of the fields just by seeing the numbers.

A similar method would be to assign a 100 series to every farm you work. Again, home farm fields would start at 1, Smith farm fields could be in the 100s, the Jones farm fields 200s, etc. And there is no reason to be shy of running into the thousands. Four digits are much easier to enter into a computer than a word.

Once you have a numbers scheme, don't change or reuse a field's number. If you rented a field for a few years and then lost it, don't use that field's number on another field you pick up. Save the number. You may get the field back some day. And, you want to avoid confusing people by reusing field numbers.

Get farm maps. The best map sets are complete, easy to use and include an overview of all your fields. This usually means hiring them made from a crop consultant. Get a set of maps to keep in all of your tractors and trucks and give a set to anyone that works in your fields including custom operators and crop suppliers. You've got a great number system to communicate with- now they just need to know where to find the field you are referring to.

Create a list of goals for your organization effort.

What do you want to be able to do once you have your cropping information organized? Getting rid of the 2' high stack of soil test reports on the filing cabinet is a good goal, but beyond that, how do you want to be able to use the soil test information?

Here are some goals of others who have improved their crop record keeping system:

- **Control rotations.** Know confidently the cropping history for any field, and not rely on memory to know how long ago you seeded

that field. Also be able to easily adjust your rotation plan and know how many acres you have in each crop.

- **Keep a field treatment history.** Again, don't rely on remembering which fields are not suitable for a crop because of the treatments they received last year.

- **Be able to make lists of fields based on soil test results.** Which fields have a low pH on their last soil test and have not yet received lime?

- **Know what varieties you planted** where, including what seeding mixtures you used on each of current stands.

- **Improve the records** you must keep for compliance purposes.

- **Be able to make a list of fields that need to be soil tested** this spring. And forecast which fields will be tested later in the year.

- **Be able to track where you put manure** for compliance purposes, but also so you can account for the nutrients you have already applied.

- **Evaluate what you can afford** to pay for renting a field based on the cost of growing the crop and the crop yields.

- **Be able to create work lists** such as Fields to Plant, Fields to Spread Manure On, Fields to Harvest, and Fields to Scout.

- **Be able to print FSA crop reports.**

There are lots of other goals you may have in mind. The point is to have a list of your goals to help you know if you are on the right track with your organization efforts.

Be realistic.

Allocate the time and make the commitment. It's relatively easy to get excited about all of the benefits a new records system will bring the farm because there is so much opportunity. Where many farms struggle is they don't realistically consider the regular time and energy necessary to maintain the system. If you are considering a software program, where will it be run, and by whom? Does the person running the system have time or are they willing to make the time ? How often will you commit to updating the program, spreadsheet, or notebook? Can you visualize the benefits of a good, organized system?

Finally, get ready for technology, don't wait for it.

A lot of us have a vague sense that the wonderful GIS technology we see now and we believe is coming in the next couple years will solve our organization needs. Not so. In fact you can't even start using most of the new technology effectively without the basics of a relatively organized system of crop, variety, and field identification.

Fields and Crops Manager is a crop management software that can help you get your fields and crops records organized. For more information, please contact Dairy One's Agricultural Management Resources team by phone at 800-496-3344, or by e-mail at amr@dairyone.com.