



Organizing your cropping...where to start?

Regardless of how basic or advanced your cropping program is, the following four recommendations can help improve your system. All of them are relatively cost efficient and can make a substantial difference in your ultimate success.

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

1. Implement a strong Field ID system using numbers.

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

Whatever your methods or opinions are about identifying fields remember that the purpose of field ID is for all the right folks to be able to communicate about fields clearly, accurately, and easily. Communication is more difficult now than ever. You likely have more fields, and more people who work on and off the farm who need to communicate with you about your fields.

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 is identification that 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 can be reliably read by the lab so they can test it and send results.

Use a unique number for every field. Avoid letters. If you only use numbers it's easier to read them be-

cause 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 eventually want to use a computer, phone, or tablet as part of your organization you can operate just from the numeric keypad and do not need to be able to touch type to efficiently enter field ID.

Don't try to use FSA numbers. Over the years fields get combined, split, and reconfigured in just about every imaginable 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 for you on your fields.)

Avoid the use of words in field ID. Bringing spelling into the communication arena provides much greater 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.

There are many ways to assign numbers and whichever you use, keep in mind that you are not going to run out of numbers. Leave room in your numbering system to add fields, and many people prefer when the number has an association with its location.

Consider a geographic screen. See Figure 1. Imagine looking down on your all of your fields from a great enough altitude that you can see all of them. Now super impose a four line grid. Think of the center box being the home farm, and assuming 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 200's and if there were 6 fields in that section they would be 201-206. And then you would just work your way around the sections ending up with all of your fields number between 1 center, and the 800's in the South East Corner. This way you end up with lots of room to add fields, and you know a little 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 100's, the "Jones Farm" fields 200's, etc. And there is not reason to be shy of running into the thousands. Four digits are way easier to enter 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 for all of your tractors and trucks and 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.

2. 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 pile 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 of the goals other farms have mentioned:

- **Control rotations.** Know confidently the cropping history for any field, and not have to rely on memory to know how long ago you seeded that field.
- **Easily adjust the rotation plan** and know how many acres you have in each crop. You also might want to keep a field treatment history to remember which fields are not suitable for a crop because of the treatments they received last year.
- **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?



Figure 1 - Field ID

- **Know what varieties you planted where**, including what seeding mixtures you used on each of current stands.
- **Improve records for compliance purposes.**
- **Make a list of fields that need to be soil tested.**
- **Track where you put manure** for compliance purposes but also to account for the nutrients you have already applied.
- **Evaluate what you can afford to pay** for rent for a field based on the cost of growing the crop and yield.
- **Create field work lists** such as Planting, Manure Spreading, Harvest, and scouting.
- **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.

3. Be realistic when allocating time, and make the commitment.

It is relatively easy to get excited about the numerous benefits a new records system because there is so much opportunity. The challenge is in setting aside the regular time and energy necessary to keep the system up. If we are talking about a software program, where will it be run, and by whom, and do they have time? How often will you commit to updating the program, spreadsheet, or notebook?

4. Get ready for technology, don't wait for it.

Many farms have a vague sense that the wonderful GIS technology and other technologies in the market will solve all their organization needs. Not so. In fact, you can't even begin thinking about using most of the new technology effectively without a relatively organized system of crop, variety, and field identification.

As you consider the goals of what you want from your new organized cropping system put it against specifics (vs. generalities) of what current technology is delivering. If getting your information organized will return profit, why delay harvesting that profit? You absolutely want a system that can work with new technology and take advantage of "as applied" records.

If you would like more information please contact Agricultural Consulting Services (www.acscrops.com). Agricultural Consulting Services (ACS) helps farmers grow better crops and navigate complex and changing environmental regulations.

They help optimize soil fertility, identify and control pests, and manage the land to minimize erosion and nutrient losses.