

Manage crop selection by applying what you already know

By Zachary Fore

Regional Educator for Cropping Systems

Forex002@umn.edu

Rapid changes are now occurring in agriculture. When I think of change two words come to mind – *opportunity* and *stress*. How do we take advantage of the opportunities change brings and at the same time minimize the stress?

Change in agriculture is usually a process, not an event. Change happens over a period of time; sometimes gradually, sometimes at an accelerated pace. At present, we appear to be in a period of faster change. However, it is critical to remember that a lot of what we currently know still applies. I think that is how to take advantage of the opportunities and minimize the stress – by applying what we already know in new ways and to new things.

For example, let's say you get a contract to produce food grade soybeans next growing season. You've grown soybeans in the past, but only feed grade. It is important to realize two things:

1. You already know the vast majority of what you need to know to grow this 'new' crop.
2. There are a few new aspects you need to know and you better find out what they are. Such as,
 - What are the quality standards?
 - Do I need to handle them differently? Store them differently?
 - What moisture should they be harvested at? Can they be mechanically dried? At what temperature?

When you approach change this way it becomes manageable. Just identify that handful of new things you need to know, then get the answers you need.

This concept applies when making your crop selections for the 2000 cropping season. The following crop selection process still applies even if you are looking at producing a crop you haven't previously grown:

1. **Know your production costs.** You can use average numbers, but it is always best to use your own numbers. If you are producing a crop you haven't grown before, average numbers for your growing area will do.
2. **Know your yield potential.** Again, your own numbers are best, but with a new crop you will have to get comparisons as close to your own situation as possible.
3. **Know the price.** Forward contracting to lock in a price makes this part easier. If you are not forward contracting you still need to know an expected price range.
4. **Calculate some different scenarios of price and yield.** Determine which crop has the most profit potential, where your comfort level is, and how much risk you are taking.
5. **Pay attention to the rotation effect.** The rotation effect can easily be 10% or more on the positive or negative side – enough to make or break your profit. Ignoring the rotation effect can be devastating, as we have learned with scab on wheat and sclerotinia on sunflower, canola, and other broadleaf crops.

6. **Know the previous herbicides used and their rotation intervals.** Some herbicides can have devastating effects on sensitive crops, even two or more years after they were applied.

So, bring on the New Era with all its opportunities and stresses. Take advantage of the opportunities, and manage the stress by applying what you already know.