Learning Needed to Make Ag Improvements

By Joel DeJong, ISU Extension & Outreach Field Agronomist

I once read that all professionals, in order to be successful in their field, need to spend at least 10% of their time on professional improvement activities. In other words, we all need to be doing some kind of learning. The agricultural world is changing – quite rapidly – and we need to find ways to “keep up.” When I and others had a chance to travel to Brazil a few years ago, I was impressed that some of the farm managers there attend school for up to six weeks annually in the crop production off-season. Our competition has learned the value of continuing education, too!

I know I need at least 10% of my time devoted to learning to keep up with the demands that you, my clients, have of me. I learn by attending events in Ames, some regional or national events to see agronomy from a bigger perspective, a lot of reading, discussions with experts, and I even use some selected videos and YouTube presentations occasionally.

Helping you learn is a key role of ISU Extension and Outreach. We are focused on taking research-based information and getting it into your hands so you can use it on your farm operation. I honestly believe we have a lot of great opportunities for you to improve your agronomic professionalism this winter. Here are some examples.

On November 28 and 29, in Ames, about 1000 agronomists and farmers from around Iowa and surrounding states will gather at the ISU ICM Conference. If you want to hear speakers from several other states, along with topics from ISU’s specialists, here is an opportunity for you. This is one of those events I do not miss! You can register at this web site: http://www.aep.iastate.edu/icm/, or contact your local Extension office for help registering at the web site. It often sells out, so if you want to go, register soon. If you cannot or do not want to attend the ICM Conference in Ames, a “mini” version of this conference will be coming to a town near you in January. This is called the ISU Crop Advantage Series. Dates and locations will be Sheldon on January 3, Okoboji on the 9th, the 16th in Storm Lake, Carroll the 22nd, and Le Mars on the 29th. Each session will feature a couple of keynote speakers, and then several topics to choose from for the remainder of the day. You can also get your private pesticide applicator continuing education done at the same time! Keep your eyes open for future advertisements for these meetings – they are educational days!

Of course, each winter there are pesticide and manure certification meetings held. We work hard to make them not only fulfill your “mandatory” requirements, but an opportunity for you to learn about agronomic issues.

Reading is a very valuable learning tool, too. Try going to the ISU ICM News web page and review articles from this past year (http://www.extension.iastate.edu/CropNews/). I go back to them often to help me answer your questions throughout the year. Also, check out the publications available at the Extension Online Store (https://store.extension.iastate.edu/). You might find several reference pieces on there that might be useful to your farming operation. Also consider reviewing the ISU F.A.R.M. on-farm research results from 2011, and from 2012 when we have it all compiled. This was previously called the NW Iowa On-Farm Research project. Many of these replicated on-farm projects took place in NW Iowa. (http://www.extension.iastate.edu/plymouth/news/2011-isu-farm-research-project-results)

Taking time to learn may seem low on your priority list sometimes, particularly when you have a long list of things to get done. We need to learn always, because things do NOT stay the same. Even if you have good advisors, I still encourage all of us to learn about some of these topics so we can be better clients of these advisors – we ask better questions, we keep these trusted advisors thinking, and we can be sure that they are doing what it takes to be the best advisor they can be for your operation.

Plan to take advantage of learning opportunities this winter. Consider ISU Extension as one of those sources!
2013 Production Practices May Change For Hogs
Submitted by Matt Swantek, ISU Extension & Outreach Swine Program Specialist

The drought effect will continue to persist even as the harvest comes to a close. Rumors across the state have yields from 100 to over 200 bushels per acre and tests weights from 50 to over 60 pounds per bushel. Location, location, location again is the story of how the summer affected production. However, the end result will be a shortfall from the spring projections of record high production to near record lows of corn that needs to be shared between ethanol and livestock. So how to get around a corn shortage and how to utilize alternative ingredients to stretch corn and soybean meal (SBM) needs. This may be an option for some, but generally speaking those markets have been tapped into a long time ago and already being divided between the four livestock sectors. As corn and SBM prices have risen so has the prices for alternative ingredients. What many forget is the other factors that are associated with these ingredients such as freight costs, quantities need to secure them, storage (bin availability or new bins), bulk density, and energy content (generally significantly lower).

There is no quick and simple means to develop, incorporate and evaluate the changes on your production strategies. Pig flows, feed efficiency, feed budgets, packer grids, health challenges, culling practices, freight, cashflows, break-evens and more need to be considered as 2012 comes to a close and 2013 uncertainties begins. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach has hosted webinars on corn quantity and quality issues in August and September. One of the objectives was to stimulate thoughts on how will you manage your operation to reach the 2013 corn crop. How many bushels of corn are needed and how will you source them if having to purchase corn? This is complicated by not knowing what next year’s growing conditions may be and how these will affect 2013 crop. In addition, one must consider pig flows, optimal marketing months, means to stretch grain needs, and work on strategies if corn and SBM are in short supply.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has initiated four regional meetings for the USDA and other agencies to get input from producers and experts on the effects and outlooks from the 2012 drought. The first was October 13, 2012 in Omaha Nebraska with the others planned for to be held in Colorado, Arkansas and Ohio. John Lawrence (Director, ANR Extension) led the agronomy discussion session and Roger Elmore (Agronomy), Shane Ellis (Ag Economics) and Matt Swantek (Swine) served as panel experts in their respective disciplines. From these meetings the agencies are to review current policies and determine if there should be updates or changes made to assist producers in the short term and/or if long term strategies need to developed.

Iowa producers needing assistance with developing and reviewing production and marketing strategies may contact an Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Production Specialist via their county extension and outreach office.

Farm Employee Management: Getting the New Employee Off to a Good Start on Day One
By Melissa O’Rourke, ISU Extension & Outreach Farm & Agribusiness Management Specialist

Farm employers spend a good deal of time to carefully recruit candidates, interview, check references, evaluate and select a new employee.

All that effort can quickly go down the drain without making the effort to get that new employee off to a good start on the very first day.

When the employment offer has been accepted, a start date should be agreed upon as soon as possible. Inform the employee of what will happen on the first day of work. Clearly communicate when they are expected to arrive.

While it may seem fundamental to the employer, help the new employee by providing the answers to some basic questions common among new employees. Send the employee a letter by US mail, or an e-mail with the answers to what might seem like very elementary questions to the employer:

1. What should I wear? Provide guidelines on footwear, gloves, or other appropriate attire. More and more, new farm employees do not have farm backgrounds and need guidance so that they arrive for the first day of work appropriately attired. Particularly in dairy and other livestock operations, there are biosecurity guidelines and some attire may be provided. Inform the new employee that they will be trained on these biosecurity procedures. Do not assume that new employees know what they should wear to work.

2. Should I bring my lunch or snacks and beverages? Some farm work sites provide a noon meal, or snacks and beverages. Others do not. Some groups of farm workers stop in town for lunch each day. Let that new employee know what the practice is at your farm and what they should bring to work.

3. Vehicles and parking questions: If the new employee is expected to have a vehicle to use in the position, this should have been communicated during the pre-employment process. Other employees may wonder something as basic as where they are expected to park (or not park) at the farm site. Provide this information.
Beef Meetings will Provide Strategies to Move Forward

By Beth Doran, ISU Extension & Outreach Beef Program Specialist

Summer is over, but cow-calf and feedlot operators continue to deal with drought-related issues. Consequently, the Iowa Beef Center and Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach are offering a winter series to help beef producers recognize, understand and manage the effects of the 2012 drought.

The Drought: “A Game Changer for Beef Operations” – Strategies to Move Forward meetings will be held in four locations in northwest Iowa. Registration ($10 per person) is payable at the door, but please call ahead to register. Phone numbers to call are listed for each location:

Nov. 14, 1:30 – 4:00 p.m. – NorthStar Bank, Estherville. Call 712-362-3434
Nov. 15, 9:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. – Plymouth County Extension, Le Mars. Call 712-546-7835
Nov. 19, 1:30 – 4:00 p.m. – ISU Demonstration and Research Farm, Castana. Call 712-423-2175
Nov. 20, 9:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. – Buena Vista County Extension, Storm Lake. Call 712-732-5056 or 712-225-6196

“These fall meetings focus on managing feed costs and alternative feeds for fall and winter feeding cows and feedlot animals,” said Beth Doran, ISU Extension and Outreach beef program specialist. “Developing feeding programs that utilize available feeds and keep feed costs in check is the goal. But, we also recognize that nitrate issues and low-quality corn silage in some cases may dictate supplemental feeding.”

With high-priced corn, producers are searching for ways to reduce corn use and still maintain performance. Chemical treatment of lower quality forages, such as cornstalks, is a possible strategy to enhance a lower quality feed and will be a part of the meeting discussion.

Other presentations include an update on the economic situation and price outlook (recorded presentation) by Lee Schulz, ISU Extension and Outreach livestock economist, and a weather forecast by Dr. Elwynn Taylor (also recorded).

The meetings will close highlighting an upcoming December webinar featuring factors to consider and planning for 2013 and beyond. Additional mid-winter meetings will feature topics relative to weather, such as pasture improvement, and economic conditions, such as the new-year cattle inventory.

(4) What documents should I bring on my first day of work? The new employee will complete a Form I-9 as well as other basic forms on the first day of work. Inform the new employee of what documents should be brought to work on the first day to assist in completing these forms necessary for compliance with state and federal law. See the Checklist for Iowa Agricultural Employers on the Ag Decision Maker webiste for a list of those forms and links to instructions.

(5) What should I not bring to work? If the employee is expected to have a cellphone, that should be communicated. Some employees may need to be instructed that electronic music devices cannot be used on the job. Likewise, if the farm is tobacco or smoke-free, the new employee should be so instructed.

(6) What will I do on my first day of work? Tell the new employee what they will do on the first day (or week) of work. Make sure that work hours (including break policies) have been clearly communicated. Provide a general outline of initial orientation and training activities. This will decrease the new employee’s apprehension or confusion and help to get the new employee off to a good start with a planned orientation program as well as initial and ongoing training opportunities.

The new employee should be promptly greeted on the first day of work. Introduce the employee to other workers and family members. Nametags can be very helpful to the new person, as it can be very confusing when meeting multiple people in the early days of employment. Immediately show the new worker the location of the restrooms and other break areas. Until the farm employer is certain that the new employee has been thoroughly trained in farm safety practices and procedures, the new employee should be accompanied by another person who is properly trained.

At the end of the first day, the new employee should be asked if there are any questions or concerns. Offer the new employee assurances about how the first day went, and again offer information about what will happen in those early days on the new job. A future article will discuss guidelines for orientation and training programs.

Surveys show that employees find job satisfaction when they feel they are being treated with respect. Treat that new employee with respect from the very beginning, and the employment relationship will be off to a good start.

As always, feel free to contact me with any of your farm employee management questions.

Published by: Dianne Dirks , ISU Extension and Outreach Pocahontas County Office Manager