

Lewis: GPS technology can take some stress from farming, increase profitability

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Not only does Hope Lewis sell agricultural products like global positioning system (GPS) technology, she swears by it.

Lewis joined Fairbanks International of Lexington in October 2008 as a precision farming specialist.

GPS can be used to increase profitability in several ways.

For example, a GPS system can include hydraulically automated steering in tractors and combines.

That means producers can watch the combine head or planter as the combine or tractor automatically drives precisely up and down rows.

Instead of having to also concentrate on keeping straight lines through the rows, Lewis said farmers can watch for other things like a head clogged with corn or debris.

“They don’t spend hours in the cab trying to drive straight in the field and go home feeling destroyed,” she explained. “There are plenty of other things to worry about.”

Productivity increases because rows are planted and harvested precisely.

Through GPS and data collected by using the technology, she said producers also determine exact application amounts of fertilizer, pesticide and water that not only increase yields but

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reduce waste.

Lewis said rates of application are calculated from data collected during the planting, growing and harvesting seasons.

In agricultural production, she said GPS uses various technologies to sense and obtain data such as moisture, fertilizer and herbicide levels and yields as equipment travels through fields.

Farmers can view data instantaneously or look at it later on a screen or print out from a computer.

Also included are such things as elevation, speed and flow of corn or other crops through the combine.

“Different growers need different information,” Lewis said.

For example, one farmer may have enough labor for harvest but not much time.

To maximize productivity, she said the producer may increase the amount of trucks to collect the crop as it's harvested to avoid bottlenecks.

The end result may not be a producer's best yield but it could be the best profit.

“You can make management decisions for your own farm,” Lewis said. “It also helps you understand your costs and limitations and where you make your money.”

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Lewis said GPS technology, as applied to agriculture, has been in existence for about 15 years.

She estimates that about 60% of Gothenburg area producers use the technology.

Systems can range from a basic model at \$2,100 to one with planter control that could easily reach \$100,000 or more.

The agricultural industry first began using GPS during harvest, Lewis said, when producers determined their location through the technology and what rows remained to pick.

“Now it’s been applied to productivity such as steering a tractor on its own,” Lewis said.

Without GPS technology, she said producers never know precisely how many nutrients and how much soil conductivity and organic matter are in the soil among other things.

With the technology, producers can sample soil in the off season to determine soil types and nutrient content.

“GPS allows you to know these things exactly and look over them during the winter to decide what to do the next year,” Lewis said.

Next year is already here with planting season about three months away.

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