

May-June 2000

# Agrimanagement Newsletter

## ENTSYS 2000

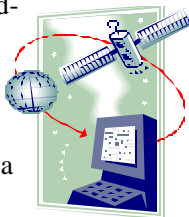
If you are currently using our entomology scouting service this year, and would like to access your reports via our secure website, please let us know. These are now available in HTML format for viewing from any web browser.

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## Some Reflections on Times Past, Far and Near

After nearly 7 decades of full time farming, my Dad is moving off the old home place farm this week. He enjoyed farming the crops, but his real love was raising cattle. In fact, we could not get him to sell off his herd until 3 years ago and even then he had to keep 7 brood cows to have a reason to run stock water and have something to watch. Now that enterprise too must pass as he moves to an assisted living facility to share his 91 years of experience with others who have lived through the pre-automobile era, the great depression, the moon landing of man, and now a communication system where both written and spoken words can circle the world in a fraction of a second.



Old cattlemen don't quit easily. Dad's cousin of Abilene, Kansas raised and pastured steers up to his death at about 93 years. I recall asking him when he was 92 why he persisted that long? His reply says something about the dynamics and economics of farming that have not changed much! "Well, I still rent extra pasture so cheap from an 80 year-old widow lady in town who doesn't know the value of pasture rent... that I just can't bare to let it go by!"

But time will move by and currently I recall 20 years ago taking irrigation samples on an orchard east of Yakima and visiting with the foreman about the prospects of Mt. St. Helens blowing. He told me, "I'd like to see it really blow and see what happens." When it did on Sunday, I recall an afternoon "captured in our house". By late afternoon, when a little sun penetrated, I received a call from Bob Hinds, Sid Morrison's Campaign Manager. He asked if I could get a soil test of the ash, of all things!

Fortunately, the sampling part was simple, so I called Marv of Yakima Testing Lab and cajoled him to venture down to his lab and do an analysis. He called me later in the evening with data, I called Bob Hinds, and he invited me to present what we had at Mr. Morrison's Monday morning press conference at the Holiday Inn. I did not want to mess up my engine on the car so rode by bicycle along nearly empty streets to get there. Our entomologist at that time, Ted Alway, was also interviewed and forecast that the dust would cause the breathing tubes of some insects to get clogged. That proved to be correct and indeed it functioned essentially as diatomaceous earth. It was a summer of unique, first-time experiences for everyone. ☞

Look for these articles in the July-August 2000 issue:

- ☐ Fall Leaf Analysis Planning
- ☐ MIS Agribusiness Part II
- ☐ Apple Outlook

## Mt St. Helens vs. Chicken Little

You may recall 20 years ago, Mt. St. Helens marked May 18<sup>th</sup> as a day to remember. Where were you on that eventful Sunday, in a church worship service, or outside trying to beat that terrible thunderstorm coming from the West?

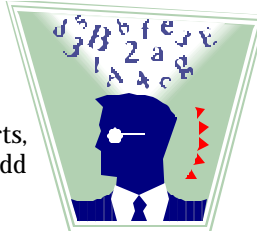
I bring this up to encourage our readers. Even back then we endured (and I suppose most survived), one way or another, a real trauma of uncertainty. I'm sure as you recall, we asked many questions, "Would the mint be salable?", "Could wheat be combined?", "Would all apples slough off?" Well of course the situation was not without consequences, and some were expensive, but there was a harvest, we persevered, learned, and prospered.

Since then, we have endured the Alar Crisis, the Challenger explosion, at least one stock market meltdown, several wars and rumors of wars, and most recently, Y2K and the Love Bug! So, for all of you doomsayers out there, remember that once, the sky did in fact fall, and thankfully, we're still here to talk about it. ☞

# MIS for your Agribusiness

By David Marshall

Managing information today can be a daunting task. As never before, we have reports containing mountains of data from so many sources. Your desk is even now likely to be cluttered with stacks of pesticide records, cost accounting reports, soil fertility data, petiole data, harvest and crop quality data, GIS data, weather data, and newsletter articles from well-meaning consultants. All too often the most important data are buried under frivolous information. Many different types of forms from spreadsheets, databases, paper reports, hand written reports, accounting reports, and text files only add to our difficulties in assimilating all the data.



We must continue to be watchful, for tomorrow's important data may be in front of us today. We know intuitively that if we could somehow harness all of it into meaningful forms, we could make better use of it.

Here are a few ideas that may help in thinking about your own data management.

**1. Plan and Organize Your Data.** Spending a little time in planning will help you in the long run stay on top of the data morass. How you collect, organize, store, and communicate data is important, and your methodologies should be carefully thought through. While not always needed, a systematic approach is sometimes warranted. Start by identifying critical areas of decision-making and listing the various types of information that could be used to support those decisions. Which types of information will have the highest payoff? For example, if improved potato returns is the goal, then knowing how the production and cultural practices of the field affect final grade and specific gravities is very important. However, you may find that the costs of implementing a full-blown precision agriculture program will outweigh the potential benefits. In each case, evaluate the costs of alternative sources and collection procedures, and also the costs of analyzing and presenting the data in a way that is understandable to those who should be using it.

Cost accounting is another area where people struggle with finding the right approach. One grower told me, "We used to do very detailed cost accounting, but we spent so much time just keeping track of keeping track that we got bogged down." Find a balance between keeping track of what is important and not worrying about what is out of your control.

**2. Use the Right Tool.** Selecting the right tool is a must. While it is theoretically possible to pound a nail in with the back end of a screwdriver, most would agree that it is highly inefficient. Similarly, it is possible to store cost accounting or packing-house data into a word processor. However, there are more efficient tools available, a "better hammer," as it were.



**3. Get it Onto One Page.** Often it is necessary to summarize key management information onto an additional one-page report. For example, a report showing yield and quality information along with key historical cost accounting trends can be very useful to you and your managers. However, keep in mind that extra work is needed to do this.

**4. Share and Integrate.** What are you doing with the information after it is collected and organized? Is it being analyzed and put to use in the most effective way throughout your organization to support decision-making? Success in this area requires an intuitive understanding of how people and processes work together. Make sure employees have easy access to needed information and procedures. If you are spending a lot of time tracking down information for someone else, think of ways to automate the process.

**5. Don't be Afraid to Delete.** Just as with our paper manila folders, it is important to occasionally purge old files that no longer have any use. If the lessons have already been learned from the test plots you did in the 1990s, it should be safe to throw away the original field notes. If there is no reason to think that those detailed expense records from 1987 will do you any more good, then throw them (or click and drag them) into the recycle bin. As a friend of mine used to remind me, "Everything in life is transitional – sooner or later, it's going to end up in the garbage."



**6. Be Careful When You Copy.** Let's say you're working on a very important spreadsheet. But you'd like your assistant to help with the data entry. So you either copy the file to his/her computer or email it to them as an attachment. It is important that you are careful not to make modifications to your copy of the spreadsheet if your assistant is still adding data to his/her copy. One of you could end up losing some of your work. This is probably one of the most common data management problems. While there are all sorts of utilities available to help you keep track of multiple users (MS-Excel and Access, for example, have really improved their sharing features in recent versions), the best method I know of is the simplest.

**Communicate.** It is imperative that there is a clear understanding as to which is the "Master / Hot" copy and which is the "Read-Only / Cold" copy. I suggest you follow a simple protocol: let the sender (the one who gives away the file) identify the receiver as the one holding the Master copy. Until your assistant sends the file back, you do not have "permission" to change your copy of the file. This seems like a simple solution, and it is, but it's easy to get so busy that you fail to pay attention to these kinds of details, and if you're not careful, you can end up with a real mess.

We have barely had an opportunity to touch the surface of MIS in Agribusiness. Next time I will focus on some of the tools available to us and how Agrimanagement is prepared to work together with you toward better synergy. ☐

## It Pays To Pick Petioles

You've likely heard it said "drink your milk because it will help you grow up big and strong" or "an apple a day will keep the doctor away". These statements are usually made with little thought, but there is truth to the fact that proper diet will aid in the health and development of a child or individual. In medical research it has been concluded that individuals who don't eat a well-balanced diet with the proper amount of vitamins and minerals tend to get sick more often and have less energy.

Although plants and animals are very different, they both are living organisms that require nutrients for normal growth and development. Plant research has shown that there are 16 elements that are essential to plant growth and they include the following: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, sulfur, boron, chlorine, copper, iron, manganese, molybdenum, and zinc. It isn't enough just to have all of these elements present within the plant for a plant to be 'healthy', but these elements need to be present at certain levels and in the proper ratio to other nutrients. This is where the whole process of petiole sampling comes into the picture. Petiole sampling provides a look into the levels of nutrients within the plant at the time of sampling.

Much research has gone into determining both sufficient and critical levels of nutrients in most crops so that data can be analyzed against a standard.

As crop consultants, we at Agrimanagement, utilize this process of taking petiole or leaf samples and analyzing the data against predetermined standards. We recommend how much or if any additional nutrients are needed to keep the plant developing optimally.

As the knowledge of how plants react to different levels of nutrients continue to expand, the management of nutrient levels through petiole sampling will continue to provide a tool to manipulate plants into producing a crop that will be more profitable. For example, we know that excess water and nitrogen on mint can increase the internode length, resulting in nodes that are farther apart than desired, which may result in increased harvest costs, without increasing yield. On high-alpha hops, it has been determined that higher nitrogen levels will lead to more plant growth and thus higher yields, but that moderate levels will cause slightly lower yields but with increased alpha acids, which has become desirable in recent years. Increased or excessive vigor in hops is also undesirable as plants may be more susceptible to powdery mildew.

At Agrimanagement, we currently provide petiole services on hops, potatoes, sweet and grain corn, peas, wheat, mint, asparagus, spinach, carrots, and cucurbits. If you think that a petiole program could benefit your crops by providing essential nutrient information, please give us a call to discuss what we could provide for you. ☞

**Q.** How much plant material do you take for a petiole test?

**A.** The size of plant material needed depends on the number and type of tests to be performed on the sample. In general we take about 75 grams of wet plant material for testing.



**Q.** How often do you sample a field?

**A.** During the Spring and early Summer we generally sample fields once each week. This is an important part of understanding the changing nutritional needs of your crop.



### Website tip:

Check out some of our favorite websites at <http://www.agrimgt.com/agrilinks.htm>.

Topics include Weather, Precision Ag, Irrigation, Product Labels, and Economics. Let us know if we should add some of *your* favorites. ☞

## Guest Plant Pathologist to Visit Northwest

Dr. Syed Fazli, a colleague of Don's from Florida, is coming to visit the valley July 17-20. He will be available to help us address some of the problem diseases which affect our crops. Dr. Fazli is a member of the National Association of Independent Crop Consultants (NAICC). He works extensively with clients in Florida, the Caribbean, and Central America who grow vegetables, and other horticultural crops. He will be touring with Don through our major geographical producing areas. ☞

## G.P.S. Services Update

In February and March, we began discussions with some of our clients about using aerial photos of infrared and vegetative index. Our plan is to take these in June on potatoes and mint and for hop growers in July. In areas of larger contiguous acreages we will visit with you about making use of large area satellite photos. We are currently developing information, prices, and a set of options that we can present to you.

If this service interests you, please give us a call or e-mail. ☞

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## CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE: [WWW.AGRIMGT.COM](http://WWW.AGRIMGT.COM)

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