

Original url: <http://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/2014/07/23/on-farm-research-done-right-can-save-producers-big-bucks/>

On-farm research done right can save producers big bucks

It takes time and effort, but doing research on your farm means you're 'not just flying blind' when buying costly inputs

By [Jennifer Blair](#)

Published: July 23, 2014

[Crops](#)



On-farm research can pay big dividends but “no data is better than bad data,” says Farming Smarter’s Ken Coles. *Photo: Jennifer Blair*

POPULAR ARTICLES

- [Alberta Federation of Agriculture aims to offer 'unified voice' for farmers »](#)
 - [Weigh scale and handling system win F.X. Aherne hog innovation awards »](#)
-
- [4-H's Beef Project website offers e-learning modules »](#)

There really wasn't much scientific about Kevin Auch's first foray into on-farm research almost 30 years ago.

"It was basically a visual display of micros being applied by hand in a severely eroded area — there was no measured-out pounds per acre or anything like that," said the [Carmangay](#)-area mixed grain farmer.

"All it would have done was shown whether there was a response. There wouldn't have been any indication of how much or what optimum levels were."

Since then, Auch's research methods have gotten better, but his end goal has remained the same: "Finding out what works and what doesn't, and trying to find out the best way to do things."

And that information has value, said Ken Coles, general manager of Farming Smarter in [Lethbridge](#).

"I know of very particular examples of people who have learned how to save \$20,000 on a quarter section through on-farm research," he said. "If it's done properly, there's value there."

Research allows producers to try new products or practices on a smaller scale to learn what will work best on their farms without a major investment in time or money.

"Would you rather spend \$10 an acre on an 'alternative' product over 1,000 acres, or would you rather do a little study that's designed properly that gives you confidence in the actual return on investment?" said Coles.

That's exactly what Auch is looking for.

- **Spray fungicides before breakfast and herbicides at lunch**

“If you do research on your own farm, it localizes data to your own climatic zone for that year,” he said. “I don’t get fooled into buying something I don’t need.”

That’s one of the main benefits, said Farming Smarter’s Lewis Baarda, who is doing field-scale research on precision agriculture.

“There’s a lot of information about different products and different practices for different crops,” he said. “If you take that into your own hands and validate that for yourself, you’ll have the opportunity to really discern what’s the best practice for you on your field.”

“Everyone’s farm has become so unique with your management practices and your soil, and there’s no cookie-cutter approach to managing variability,” adds Coles.

“We need to have a variable approach.”

Bad data

That said, Coles warns that even with properly designed research (see accompanying story), “it’s really easy to create bad data.”

“When you do it yourself, you want to believe what you’ve done is right,” he said. “You are investing in something in doing on-farm research. If you get bad data, you want to use it because of that investment.

“(But) no data is better than bad data.”

That’s been one of the biggest challenges for Auch.

“Sometimes you get your blinders on and you think that you’re doing something in a way that will get you good data, and you can fool yourself,” he said.

“And then you might just end up spending a lot of money doing something that doesn’t pay because you got bad data in the first place.”

In Farming Smarter’s field-scale research trials, Coles plans for 50 per cent failure – a price many producers are unwilling to pay.

“Doing on-farm research is just as much about attitude as it is about know-how,” he said.

“If you’re not committed to doing it properly, I’d almost suggest not doing it or hire somebody to help you out.”

Baarda agrees.

“If you’re going to do it, you have to have the mindset that the results are important, and you have to be willing to put in the time,” he said. “No doubt about it, it’s going to be a hassle. It’s not easy.”

Time factor

It’s important to have the right equipment and setup to make things as easy as possible, said Auch, adding he doesn’t spend “a whole lot of extra time” on his projects.

“A lot of the time, you’re doing this research when you’re busy and you don’t want to waste time and lose more dollars by delaying an operation that has to be done in a timely manner,” he said.

“But it’s not like I’m spending my entire summer doing research. I’m a commercial farmer trying to grow a crop.”

In the canola variety trials he’s running this summer, he seeded six varieties with two replications each along with three replications of a check strip variety. That work took less than 90 minutes.

Projects don't have to be elaborate, either. Testing two different fungicides can be as simple as going "across the field on an angle a couple of times in a couple different places" with the two products, said Auch.

"You can sometimes tell a lot just from a visual response to two different treatments," he said.

"It doesn't really cost anything other than a tiny bit of time during a time when you have more time."

For the most part, said Auch, on-farm research is not going to be "an exact science."

"There's always things that come at us," he said. "But at least we have a better educated guess. We're not just flying blind and taking somebody else's word for every little thing we're doing on the farm.

"We have the information ourselves... and it gives you that extra degree of confidence in what you're trying."

About the author

Jennifer Blair