

The Face Of Farming Is Constantly Changing

By: Gene Prim

The basic fundamentals of farming are quite simple . . . you put a few seeds in the ground in the spring and in the fall you hope to take out a whole lot of seeds or a big end product that has expanded in size by hundreds of times such as a sugarbeet.

In between those two events, however, there are a whole lot of things that can and will go wrong, will influence that final result and prevent a profitable trip to market. Not the least of those road bumps is the weather.

The past two growing seasons have been a study in contrasts. The year 2019 was an absolute nightmare, start to finish. The following growing season of 2020 was the model plan that farmers hope for every year. Mostly, at least.

Crop year 2019 started with a late spring. Farmers traditionally hope for an early entry into their fields somewhere around mid-April. That can vary by a couple of weeks either way. In rare cases there have even been tractors tilling soil in late March. Many years that mid-April start to fieldwork is missed and it is early May before crops go in the ground. In 2019 we were late into May before any crops went in the ground. It was into June before the last of the soybeans were planted. Some fields never were seeded due to cold, wet conditions.

Even with the late start, sometimes things work out if the weather cooperates. That never happened in 2019. The summer was cool and wet, very wet. We never got the heat degree days that are needed to bring in a good crop, or any crop for that matter. Harvest was a month late on everything with wheat being combined in September and October. Soybeans came off reluctantly and not without a mud fight in October and November.

Corn harvest in 2019 carried over into 2020. There was very little corn combined by the time deer season rolled around in early November. Corn was being picked as the ground froze in December. But the corn that was out there was very wet and very light when it was dried down. The market also was a disaster with corn struggling to get much over \$2 per bushel after dockage and deducts for the light corn.

Many farmers continued to harvest some of the 2019 corn crop over the winter with many fields of corn left until after spring work in 2020 before combining could be completed. The late harvest meant a lot of corn fields became prevent



Wheat and all other small grains have fallen out of favor with area farmers. The acres keep slipping backwards a little more each year as growers change wheat acres to corn or soybeans.

plant acres by June of 2020.

As bad as the rest of the crops were in 2019 they were great compared to sugarbeets. Farmers began mudding out their beet acres in August and harvest officially began on October 1. The beet harvest dragged out until it was finally shut down by frozen ground in November. Locally hundreds of acres of beets remained frozen in the mud as the harvest campaign ground and groaned to a halt.

Bad as it was around here, we were much better off than farmers to the north of us where thousands of acres of beets were frozen in winter mud. Adding insult to injury, farmers who could not harvest their beets owed upwards of \$350 per acre to the factory for not bringing in a crop.

Crop year 2020 was a dream compared to the preceding year. Farmers were in the field on time in early April. There were timely rains throughout the summer with lots of nice, warm weather scattered between weekly rain showers. It was just too warm for a bumper crop of wheat but not a lot of it was being grown anyway.

But, and there always seems to be a big “but” involved every year, in September of 2020 we got hit by an early frost. It was not the disastrous killer frost that puts an end to

the growing season but the mid-September frost did leave signs that it had nipped a lot of plants. It was a yield reducer rather than the disaster that it could have been some years.

Soybeans were a mixed bag in 2020. They ranged from just awful to near record harvests for some farmers. The lower end of the soybean harvest came off wet, flat ground that produced virtually nothing. Soybeans hate to have their feet wet and there was a lot of that condition in play last year.

Well drained land, however, was an entirely different matter. Soybeans liked those conditions combined with the warm weather and responded with a good yield. There were many reports of soybeans running between 45 and 50 bushels to the acre on good well-drained ground.

Wet acres combined with good acres, saw an overall local yield average of somewhere between 30 and 40 bushel to the acre soybeans last year.

Sugarbeets went according to schedule this past year. Fields were all seeded by early May and began to be opened and factories fired up in August. On October 1 the beet harvest campaign began and in a couple of weeks it was all over, the beets safely stored in huge piles scattered throughout the growing

area. The sugarbeet crop came out dry and fast. The yields were better than average across the growing area. Price on beets is never known until the final check is delivered to growers.

Corn is king around here and it has been the backbone of the local ag economy for the past couple of decades. The growing conditions in 2020 proved again that corn was a good choice locally. There were a lot of 200 bushel to the acre cornfields grown in 2020. The overall average for all corn acres in 2020 is likely somewhere between 150 and 175 bushels to the acre.

But that was then and this is now. Whatever the conditions were in the past two seasons, they will be different this year.

Farmers are right now finalizing plans for the 2021 growing season and are looking to get back into their fields in April. There are not likely to be a lot of plan changes as far as planting intentions this spring. Corn and soybeans will be the two most popular crops planted this year. Both of those crops will likely expand acreage a little this year at the expense of wheat.

Small grains used to rule the cash crop roost around here but they have fallen completely out of favor. There is still a fair amount of wheat grown around here but it is

mainly a crop rotation item for some growers. For other farmers, they prefer wheat and soybeans to the late season combining and possibly even the gamble of the following spring harvest of corn.

As far as other small grains, well, there really aren’t any grown anymore. You might see an occasional field of barley grown under contract to a brewery who will convert the barley into the beer food group. There are a few acres of oats grown under contract for sale to horse owners to feed their animals.

Other specialty crops grown locally include alfalfa for livestock feed and also for sale to dairies. There will also be a brilliant yellow display in August as the local sunflowers come into full bloom.

In the 1970s there were thousands of acres of sunflowers grown around the region. But disease and birds have put sunflowers on the least favored list. There are still a notable amount of sunflowers grown, especially if the spring extends out, fields are wet and a fast maturing crop such as sunflowers is the only alternative.

The one thing that is always certain in the agriculture field is that nothing is certain. It is a constantly changing business. The last few years have been traumatic in the industry. Many familiar family names that have been involved with farming for decades and even over a century are now gone from the business.

There are many reasons for the exit of some farmers from farming. First and foremost has been the prices received for commodities during the past half dozen years. For the first decade of the 21st century, farming was a promising career choice for many. Then prices peaked for most commodities in 2012.

That banner year saw big yields coming off the fields at record-setting prices. Soybeans, right out of the field were bringing \$17 per bushel. Wheat was worth \$12 to \$15 per bushel depending upon when it was sold. Corn was bringing \$7 per bushel, field to elevator. Sugarbeets came in with an average yield in the high 20-ton to the acre range with over \$70 per ton being realized by the time the final check was received.

But that was a long time ago. For the past half dozen years the prices have been spiraling downwards. Corn has struggled and usually failed to bring \$3 per bushel. Wheat wouldn’t gross \$5 per bushel most years. Soybeans were a mixed bag with some government subsidies

available to offset the low price but the markets were not good. Sugarbeets, usually the one crop that could be counted upon, saw some real declines in both price and ability to bring in a crop.

In some years, high yields were able to offset many of those low prices. But you cannot depend upon a big yield every year. As an example, 2019 saw low yields combined with low prices with disastrous results. Young farmers with little equity quickly lost their enthusiasm for farming under those conditions. Many left the business and looked for office jobs off the farm.

For the older, experienced farmers, there was usually a long talk with a banker or a financial consultant about the wisdom of continuing to farm and gamble with land and machinery equity. Many could not see any light at the end of the tunnel, pulled the plug on the occupation they loved and rented out their land. Equipment was sold or auctioned. Land was offered for sale in some cases but usually it was rented out to a family member, a neighbor, or in some cases, a big, corporate farm.

The same numbers of acres are still being farmed locally, but there are now just fewer, older farmers doing the planting and harvesting.

While the faces of the men and women doing the farming were changing, so too have the support businesses. Many of the facilities that have served farmers for over a hundred years are now gone or significantly changed.

A few of those missing ag businesses include the century-old Rothsay Farmers Coop and the Kragnes Farmers Coop. Those two entities combined forces and formed Valley Ag Partners only three years ago. The partnership lasted only two years before hitting serious financial difficulties. In 2020 the assets of the two coops were leased by Maple River Grain and Agronomy who purchased those assets later in the year.

The two local coops, Rothsay and Kragnes, operating as Valley Ag Partners, had earlier divested themselves of their 50% ownership in the Agassiz Valley Grain Terminal north of Barnesville. That 50% ownership was sold to an Argyll elevator. Other owners of AVG are Farmers Coop Elevator of Fergus Falls and Archer-Daniels-Midland.

Another major ag business that

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Although not highly favored as a cash crop any longer, sunflowers are simply beautiful for about two weeks a year in August as they hit full yellow bloom. Two varieties are grown around here, confection and oil seeds. Both are subject to disease and attacks by birds as the seeds ripen.



Sugarbeets have been a savior crop for many farmers over the years. Beet acres have not been as popular for the past few planting seasons but with an ideal growing and harvest season in 2020, beets are again on the favored list.