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Farmer busts some myths about farming Topics: commodity markets, pesticides, water quality and more

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Russ Elliott

EVANSVILLE – Russ Elliott said there are some misconceptions about farming that he would like to share from a farmer’s point of view.

Elliott, a Douglas County farmer and president of the Douglas County Corn and Soybean Growers Association, said farmers don’t set the price of their commodities. Farmers follow the U.S. commodities market, which is driven by the world-wide market. He also noted that world events can also have an impact on the U.S. commodity market.

For instance, what is happening in the Ukraine is making an impact on wheat markets in the U.S., said Elliott. Short term, he said it will be good for U.S. farmers because it will help boost income.

However, in the long term, Elliott said it will create “demand destruction.” He explained that the end users, like consumers for example, are just going to buy less because the price of the product is higher. Maybe they will buy less bread in the supermarket or maybe farmers who feed wheat to their cattle might get rid of some cattle because of rising costs.

In the grand scheme of things, it may not seem like much, but it can add up, he said.

Too much fertilizer?

Another myth or misconception is that farmers over fertilize and over-use pesticides.

“We have the ability to accurately apply fertilizer within 98% accuracy,” said Elliott,

needed is applied. Technology plays a huge role in this as samples are taken and then data is uploaded to a program on his iPad and then from there, based on that data, the proper amounts are applied.

“Not every acre in Douglas County is treated the same,” he said. “It’s not just some blanket program that every farmer uses. Most farmers are environmentally friendly and we’re not just wasting fertilizer and pesticides.”

Elliott said to think about going to a gas station, filling up your vehicle and for fun, continuing to let the gas pump run with the gas dumping all over the ground. He said it just makes no sense.

Drain tiles and water quality

According to Elliott, properly installed drain tiles have little impact on water quality.

He said field drainage tile is a plastic pipe with perforations in it that is installed into farmers’ fields.

“When you put a drain tile into the field, you’re trying to remove the excess moisture so that you have more oxygen so that the roots are able to grow deeper and your crops are healthier,” he said. “If there is fertilizer that has migrated deeper into the soil, the roots are able to grow down to that depth and retrieve the fertilizer and then bring it back up into the plant.”

And the only times that really happens, Elliott said, is when there are massive amounts of rain. If farmers didn’t have drain tiles, people would see runoff a lot sooner. Drain tiles are sized for the acreage that they are going to drain. He said

ideally, they are sized so that the ponded water would be removed from the field within a 24-hour period because if water is not removed in that period, crops tend to die. Crops can’t survive if they are underwater after 24 hours.

“If you have properly installed drain tile, it’s giving the water 24 hours to release any sediment that would have washed out and leave it in the field instead of having water run off,” said Elliott.

Properly installed drain tiles are there to help farmers and the land.

Farming practices

There is no perfect way to grow crops, Elliott said. In Douglas County, the three main ways of farming are organic, no till or conventional tillage.

For organics, Elliott said there are no pesticides used and only organic fertilizer. Commercial fertilizers can’t be used by a certified organic farmer.

Organic farming uses machines to control weeds and the land has to be tilled, he added.

“So the positive is you have no ‘unnatural’ things being used,” said Elliott. “The downfall is, the more tillage you have, the more carbon you release into the atmosphere and an increased chance for soil erosion. Organic farms also tend to have lower yields.”

A no till farm means there is little to no tillage and a very minimal amount of carbon is released into the atmosphere, explained Elliott. But he noted that most no-till farms likely use more pesticides to replace weeding done by

tillage but they grow average yields.

He added that no till doesn’t work for all soil types. Conventional tillage farming is a hybrid of the two – organic and no till, he said.

“We do some tillage but use less pesticides,” he said, noting again that there is no perfect way to grow crops.

Because of heavier soils in this area and because of the cooler average temperatures, Elliott said the conventional tillage method leaves the soil black which warms sooner and seems to be the most popular.

Breaking up new land

A comment that is often heard, Elliott said, is that farmers continue to till up and break new land to increase their acreage. But he said a fact that is not well known is that every year, agricultural land decreases.

While doing some research on this, Elliott said a study out of the University of Illinois found that in a 16-year period of time, there was a 14 million acre reduction in ag land in the U.S. That ag land includes any ag land that is enrolled through the USDA’s office, he said.

The main driver for the loss of agricultural land? Elliott believes it’s development. He said there’s some land that is put into perpetual easements with governmental agencies like the Department of Natural Resources or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, but most of the time, he said the loss of land is because of development.

Finding farmland is probably the toughest part of farming, he said.

Ukraine

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However, U.S. coastal states generally get their fertilizer from Russia or its ally, Belarus. If the coastal states increasingly turn to Canada for potash, that could drive fertilizer prices up still further.

Fertilizer prices have already skyrocketed, said Hlatky. It is one of the farming supplies Pro-Ag sells, and prices have jumped by 40-50%, or about \$250 to \$300 more a ton, he said.

Fertilizer is generally ordered months in advance, so the higher costs will generally affect next year’s crop, he said.

Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen said with artificial fertilizer prices rising, Minnesota farmers have been more interested in using manure from cattle and hog farms.

Manure is a good natural fertilizer, although it can be more difficult to apply, he said.

Still, “Hog farmers are saying it’s a hot commodity,” he said.

Fuel

The price of gasoline and diesel has risen globally, and experts cite multiple reasons, including OPEC controlling supplies and increased demand for fuel as pandemic numbers dwindle.

However, one key reason for higher prices is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the U.S. stopping imports of Russian oil.

Fuel is a big expense for farmers, who need to fuel up every time they send a plow across a field. They also use fuel to dry grains and haul crops.

A farm that uses 100 gallons of diesel fuel a day will spend about \$1 to \$1.50 more per gallon than a year ago, so about \$100 to \$150 more per day.

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