



Crop farmers learn about the latest University research from ag pros trained by Extension. Pictured: Farmer John Dosedall, right, and Crop Consultant Paul Groneberg.

Reaching more farmers through ag professionals

Extension research and education helps feed a growing population while protecting the environment

Since its inception in 1909, Extension has worked with farmers to find solutions to the biggest challenges. For the past 25 years, Extension has shared the University's research and knowledge with ag professionals, the people who have the most influence on crop farmers today.

John Dosedall says he wouldn't want to farm today without his certified crop consultant, Paul Groneberg. Dosedall grows corn and soybeans near the small town of Hancock in western Minnesota.

"Agriculture has become a highly complex field," says Groneberg, who works for Centrol—a major crop-consulting enterprise in Minnesota. "Farmers need to pull a lot of pieces together to manage the farm, just like with any other business." Ag professionals like Groneberg build the skills they need to help farmers navigate the complexity through regular participation in Extension's Institute for Ag Professionals.

Extension's strategy with ag professionals targets consultants, seed and fertilizer dealers, pesticide applicators, and local Extension educators. The Institute for Ag Professionals reaches its audience through an annual Field School delivered at the University's Research and Outreach Centers, Research Updates offered at locations throughout Minnesota, and a Crop Pest Management course that is part of a trade show each December in

Minneapolis. All of these programs offer certification credits, which are mandated by most crop-consulting organizations.

According to a 2011 survey, ag professionals serve approximately 61 clients each, having an impact on some 48,000 acres. That equates to 4.3 million acres across the state and surrounding regions that Extension's research-based education impacts, based on participation in Institute for Ag Professionals Research Updates alone.

It all began in the mid-1980s when Extension and the ag industry collaborated to start the Field School for Ag Professionals. That led to the development of the Institute for Ag Professionals, which has since become a successful model emulated nationwide because it multiplies the impact of research and education.

By showing real examples in the University's research crop fields, specialists like Jeff Gunsolus provide hands-on learning. Gunsolus is an Extension agronomist and weed-science specialist and one of the researchers who teach ag professionals.



TIMELINE

Reaching farmers in times of change

1970s and earlier

Extension reaches farmers one-by-one and through direct outreach workshops, involving farmers in research and helping them keep up with accelerating science and technology.

1980s Farm crisis hits American farms. The ag profession grows, but many ag industry professionals do not have bachelor's degrees.

1986 Extension and industry come together to offer joint programming via the Field School for Ag Professionals, first held at Crookston and leading to the development of Extension's Institute for Ag Professionals.

1990s Extension offers continuing education credits that apply toward the completion of a Certified Crop Adviser program.

2000s Changing environmental landscapes focus research on water quality and other concerns. Extension continues on-farm research to develop solutions in partnership with farmers and the ag industry.

Today Agriculture has become a much more technical, specialized field, with a higher need for business savvy. Eighty-seven percent of participants say they would recommend Extension's offerings for ag professionals.



(Top) Extension specialists take teaching from the classroom into the field. Pictured: Jeff Gunsolus, Extension agronomist, right, with Mike Blaine, Pioneer account manager.

(Left) Sampling and analyzing a soil core ensures farmers target deficiencies with the right nutrients.

"The agricultural landscape has changed, with herbicide issues in the forefront," says Gunsolus. "When their professionals can explain to farmers which is the right herbicide on the right weed at the right time, farmers use fewer chemicals." Farm resources are then used more efficiently, weeds develop less resistance, and environmental impacts are reduced.

"There are sometimes contradictions between research-based recommendations and business recommendations," notes Jochum Wiersma, Extension small grains specialist. "So only by working together can we change behavior over time."

Dosdall agrees that he has made changes in his operation under Groneberg's guidance. "I apply that knowledge to my cropping system," he explains. "I don't put the same application on every part of my field after learning how to determine which nutrients are needed by which areas."

Like many Institute for Ag Professionals participants, Groneberg is certified in his profession. The development of the Certified Crop Adviser program in the mid-1990s

came about as a synthesis of efforts between the University and the ag industry. This formalized certification ensures growers that those advising them are trained on current topics and best practices.

"The certification workshops go hand-in-hand with all of Extension's opportunities for ag professionals," says Mike Blaine, an account manager for Pioneer, and one of the first to get certified by the program. "We can get into the mode of thinking we already know everything, but things are always changing."

Tony Jacobs is another ag professional who has lived the change in modern agriculture. He covers seven counties in South Central Minnesota working for Crystal Valley Cooperative. He says he relies on Extension for current, timely and accurate information he can provide to growers.

"Growers must compete in the world marketplace," says Jacobs. "Staying current on University research helps me help farmers be environmentally responsible in an era when profit margins are made on efficiencies."