

## The Best Tool On Your Farm?

Here are five uses for your cell phone that help you manage your operation. And it's just the beginning. **BY CLAIRE VATH**

**N**athan Faleide walks through his soybean field to see whether there are more weeds in the higher vegetative areas versus the lower ones. To help find those pockets of higher vegetation, the Maddock, N.D., farmer takes a cell phone from his pocket. "I can walk out into the field and pull satellite images of my crop up on the screen," explains Faleide, who is also the sales and marketing manager for Agri ImaGIS Technologies and its just-released SatShot Mobile application.

A cell phone just may be one of your farm's best management tools that you never really considered. As these devices function more like personal computers, their uses on the farm go beyond just practical applications.

Here are five things your cell phone can do now to help you make smarter—and more profitable—decisions.

### 1. Check commodity markets

Ken McCauley, who farms 4,500 acres of corn and soybeans near White Cloud, Kan., got his first smartphone when he became president of the National Corn Growers Association in 2007.

"I was already regularly receiving and sending texts on my cell phone at that point," he says. "The BlackBerry has made texting and staying connected that much easier."

In 2005, McCauley became one of the first customers of Commodity Update, a service that sends up-to-the-minute commodity market data to a user's cell phone for a low monthly fee. Other companies like DTN offer the service as well.

"Markets don't stop because the farmer has to go to town for parts," says Commodity Update founder Joel Jaeger. "The volatility that producers face today is exponentially greater than that seen just a few years ago. Being on the wrong side of that volatility can put a farmer out of business."

Having the ability to keep tabs on the market has paid dividends for McCauley and his friends. He recalls being in a meeting in June 2009 when new-crop corn was still about \$6. A friend e-mailed him to ask his opinion on selling new-crop corn. "I didn't have much



time, but I e-mailed my advice. That day, he hedged 100 bushels per acre one year ahead for \$6, purely on the information I was able to provide because I knew what the markets were doing."

### 2. Monitor the weather

When Nevada, Iowa, farmer Will Axmeier starts work in the morning, he pulls out his BlackBerry and checks DTN Mobile for ag news, USDA crop reports and weather. "They have a great weather program," he says. "There's a preset timer that estimates how long it will take the rain to be at your place. I can sign up for weather texts too."

A variety of weather-related applications are available for your cell phone. Programs like DTN Mobile, WeatherBug and My-Cast show you everything, including real-time radars, future



forecasts, humidity, sunrise and sunset, severe storm alerts and cloud cover. DTN Mobile delivers ag and energy forecasts, along with weather history, current conditions and predictions to your mobile phone.

“There’s a lot of information I can get on my small screen,” says Axmear.

### 3. Get satellite field maps of your crops

Just released last month, and still getting its kinks worked out, SatShot Mobile is an application used for ag mapping. The current version works on all Internet-capable phones.

“Agri ImGIS has one the largest farm databases in the country, which allows users to find and map their fields by just typing in their name and state,” explains Faleide, who uses SatShot Mobile on his own farm for middle-of-the-field scouting. “This makes mapping

farms and fields quick and easy; it takes seconds instead of hours or days.”

Once you sign up for the service, you’ll be able to pull up images of your fields. From there, you can pick the specific field you’d like to view. Also available is an archive of satellite images that goes back over 10 years.

Looking ahead to the spring, Faleide says, an iPhone application will be released that lets you take notes or mark the crop status at a particular GPS pinpoint on the SatShot Mobile map. The company also soon will be able to take additional photos of fields twice a week and send an e-mail notification when the satellite uploads the images.

### 4. Know when to water your crops

The SmartCrop application by Dynamax can send messages to your phone when your crop is experiencing drought or heat stress.

“We can feed information to the grower via the cell phone at his option,” says Tommy Martin, CEO at SmartField Inc. “The farmer can put in alerts for systems—crop stress, rain events, etc.”

Field sensors use infrared temperature to determine if the crops have suffered heat stress or need water.

Glenn Schur uses SmartCrop to conserve water on his 1,800-acre farm near Plainview, Texas. “I feel like it has helped in scheduling my irrigation,” he says. Schur estimates SmartCrop saves his operation 1½ to 2 inches of water a year and about \$25 to \$30 an acre a year on irrigation (energy) costs. “It can be quite a financial reward.”

### 5. Monitor grain bins

Rick Reidt describes BinManager, a complete management system that monitors the temperature and moisture content of stored grain, as “a real plus for farmers who want to keep a handle on the condition of their grain.

“If there is a hot spot detected, it alerts the farm operator by either cell phone or computer,” explains Reidt, an agronomic consultant with the Missouri-based AgTeam Professionals. “This allows for quick response time. A farmer can check the condition of grain via Blackberry or cell phone. Even if the farmer is off-site or on vacation, he always has a way of controlling.”

Adds BinManager’s director of marketing Angela Cummins: “There’s nothing else out there that has a moisture cable that measures true moisture content in the grain.” ●