AGRI-FACTS
Practical Information for Alberta's Agriculture Industry

November 2010 Agdex 814-1

How to Select and Hire an Agronomist or Crop Advisor

Crop production in Alberta has become more complex and technically challenging. It has become increasingly difficult to balance the many demands of a successful farming operation, including the agronomic management of a number of different crops, crop scouting of all fields, long-term crop planning, input planning and purchasing as well as crop marketing.

It can be hard to keep up with and evaluate the latest opportunities, innovations, research and technologies that could benefit the bottom line of your farming operation. There are many factors to consider such as changing cropping opportunities, crop varieties, equipment innovations, fertilizer management options, changing disease and insect populations as well as new pest control options.

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Background

External influences, such as the environment, regularly complicate the decision making of farmers every year. Challenging years with unusual weather conditions often bring unusual crop production problems and even more challenging questions on crop management.

As a farmer, where do you go for reliable crop management advice or answers to complex crop problems:

- your local Ag retailer?
- chemical company representatives?
- the internet?
- crop production club or group that shares knowledge and experiences?
- direct contact with government specialists or research scientists?
- neighbours?
- farm magazines or newspapers?
- the coffee shop?

Alberta farmers can access information from Alberta Agriculture's "Ropin' the Web" internet site (website address: http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca), and they can access advice by telephone from the Alberta Ag-Info Centre (a toll-free call in Alberta at 310-FARM (3276) for soil and crop production.

To access further extension services and to diagnose problems in the actual field, some producers are considering using the services of a private crop advisor or agronomist, hired to provide on-farm consulting services.

Farmers who are considering hiring someone to provide crop production advice need to evaluate whether or not an agronomist would benefit their operation. Then, if a decision is made to hire an agronomist, a farmer should go through a selection process to select an advisor that would be a good fit with both the farm operation and the management philosophy of the farm.

Do you need an agronomist?

Here are the first questions you should ask:

1. Are you satisfied with your crop yields and the crop management on your farm?
2. Are you achieving crop yields that reflect your level of inputs?
3. Are you comfortable with your crop management knowledge and the decisions you make on most aspects of growing crops on your farm?

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If you answered "yes" to these questions, then perhaps you may not benefit personally or financially from hiring an agronomist.

However, if you feel you are not optimizing your crop yields and there is opportunity to enhance your level of crop management, or you do not have time to spend in the field to assess crop conditions, you could benefit from an independent source of technical expertise.

You may also benefit from an agronomist if you struggle with decision making on issues such as the following:

- What crop rotations and crop variety options are most suitable for your farm?
- What is required to produce new crops, or what specialized varieties are the best or highest yielding crop varieties for your area?
- Should you be soil testing and do you know how to interpret laboratory results and recommendations?
- What are the best fertilizer management practices needed for each crop type, including rates and application options?
- Do you have a good knowledge of weed identification and growth staging, including the best herbicides for weed control for crops on your farm?
- Can you identify the diseases and insects in your crops; do you know the economic thresholds necessary for control and which pesticides are most effective?
- Can you identify and diagnose soil or crop problems in your fields?

If you feel having a dependable source for agronomic information would be helpful, you might benefit from having an agronomic consultant. To hire a crop advisor or agronomist, you should go through an interview process to decide who would be best suited to work with you.

Selecting an agronomist

Hiring an agronomist is costly and should be treated seriously like the selection of a new seeder or combine. A consulting agronomist must be a good fit with your farm operation, the crops you grow and your farm management philosophy. If you and your agronomist are not a good match, your farm may become less profitable, and you will not be happy.

Remember, the person you choose will be responsible for advising you on all aspects of crop production. Poor or misleading advice could be very costly in terms of reduced yields and profit. However, excellent, timely advice could mean significant improvements in crop yields, the profitability of your farm and, ultimately, your well being and peace of mind.

Therefore, it is critically important to select a suitable agronomist. The selection process will take some time, research and investigation, but will be worth the effort!

Selection process

First, take some time to think about what you require from an agronomist:

- What types of knowledge would the agronomist need to have for assisting with your farm operation?
- What specific services do you want the agronomist to provide, such as soil sampling, fertilizer recommendations, crop scouting for weeds for herbicide recommendations, crop scouting for insect or disease problems, grain storage or crop marketing advice?
- Would you require advice on a regular basis or on an as-needed basis for unusual problems?
- Would you require weekly crop scouting with regular detailed advice and recommendations?
- How would you want your weekly reports: verbally in a one-on-one meeting after field scouting or in written form either dropped off at the farm or in an e-mail?

The next step is to obtain the names of agronomists. Talk to other farmers, industry representatives and your Ag retailer for names of agronomists in your area. Make sure to ask for honest opinions and comments about each potential candidate to develop a sense of his or her reputation. You can also post job advertisements on the Alberta Institute of Agrologists and Western Canada Certified Advisor websites (sites are listed at the end of this factsheet).

After you develop a list of potential advisors, take the next steps:

- Narrow down your list to three or four agronomists that have good recommendations and qualifications.
- Set up an interview meeting with each agronomist.
- If an agronomist is unwilling to do an interview meeting, take that prospect off your list!

You want an agronomist who is willing to give you the respect and time to meet with you to answer your questions.

Questions and goals

Finding the right fit means exploring several key aspects to ensure you get what you need. The following sections detail the selection criteria and questions you could use for the goals you want to achieve:

- education and professional training
- knowledge and experience
- services offered and availability
- crop advising philosophy
- information sources, tools used and backup support
- fees and expenses

You should develop questions for the interview with the help of this publication and other producers who use independent agronomists. Questions can be grouped into the above general categories.

Education and professional training

First, you need to determine the individual's formal agricultural training at college or university. Ask about the professional training the agronomist has completed. Does the agronomist have formal professional education; did the individual successfully graduate and what was their major or specialty?

You need to determine:

- Was a college diploma(s) completed with a specialization in soil, plant or crop science or agronomy?
- Was a university degree(s) completed with a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture with a specialization in soil, plant or crop science or agronomy?
- Were the institutions in western Canada? If not, is the training relevant to your farming area?
- Are the institutions attended creditable?

Next, determine what credentials the agronomist holds:

- a Professional Agrologist (P.Ag.) designation, which would indicate a member in good standing of the Alberta Institute of Agrologists and a graduate in agriculture from a recognized university
- a Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) designation? – a CCA designation does not necessarily mean the individual has college or university training, but does indicate that they have passed a series of written examinations, which allows the use of the CCA designation

Agronomists with either a P.Ag. or CCA designation are required to complete a certain level of training each year to maintain their designation. If a prospective candidate does not have any formal education or professional designations, the candidate may be weak in education, knowledge and capability.

Goal: Do you have confidence in the individual's formal education and training?

Knowledge and experience

Next, you need to develop an understanding of the knowledge and professional experience of the agronomist. You want to make sure the agronomist has extensive experience with western Canadian crop production systems.

Specifically, you want to make sure they have expertise working with the soils of your region and the crops grown on your farm. You want to make sure they have experience with the production systems you are currently using or wanting to adopt such as direct seeding, manure nutrient management or irrigated crop production.

To achieve these goals, ask for the following:

- the candidate to provide a resume with work experience with references from previous employers and farmers
- about the candidate's local soil and crop knowledge and experiences
- about experience with the crops you grow on your farm to establish the level of knowledge
- if the agronomist is familiar with soil sampling, testing and interpretation and knowledgeable about soil fertility and fertilizer management, weeds, registered herbicides, diseases, registered fungicides, insect pests and registered insecticides for the crops you grow
- where the agronomist obtains information and recommendations that would be provided to you
- a number of specific technical questions in these areas that are critical to ensure each agronomist has the knowledge level you require

Goal: Do you have confidence in the knowledge of the individual?

Services offered and agronomist availability

You need to inquire about the services the agronomist can offer you. Keep in mind the services you require and the services the agronomist is willing to offer. Will the agronomist provide all services, or can you pick and choose which services you would like to receive?

You need to determine the level of availability to spend time with you to provide advice and explain the reasons for the advice. Ask:

- How frequently will your fields be scouted?
- How will fields be scouted – individually or as groups?
- Will fields be scouted by walking or will a quad be used; what type of pattern will be used to do a thorough job of inspecting the field?
- Will summer staff be used for field scouting or will the agronomist do all field scouting individually?
- How much time would be spent inspecting each field at each visit?
- Will the agronomist be flexible to meet with you after fields are inspected?
- Will the agronomist provide verbal reports immediately after field inspection or will results be communicated by dropping off paper reports, sending text messages or e-mail during the growing season?
- Will the agronomist take time to show you soil or crop problems in the field?
- Does the agronomist soil sample all your fields and pay for soil analysis? If so, when are fields sampled, how many samples per field, what depths are sampled, which lab does the analysis and does the agronomist develop fertilizer recommendations for you?
- Will the agronomist look after manure samples for analysis and recommendations?
- In the off-season, will the agronomist meet with you to provide advice and assistance in planning crop rotations, crop variety selection, review soil test reports and develop fertilizer management plans and seeding plans?

You will need to develop a sense of the agronomist's availability, how many other clients are served and a sense of each agronomist's professionalism. Ask questions and make observations to get a sense of a number of aspects:

- How many other clients or acres are served? Are they in your local area?
- Will the agronomist have the time to meet your field inspection needs and personal one-on-one discussion requirements?
- Does the agronomist act kindly and professionally?
- Is the agronomist well organized and neat in appearance?
- Check out the agronomist's vehicle – is it well organized with various tools and equipment needed (shovel, trowel, soil sampler, sample bags for soils and plant tissue samples, information booklets and reference manuals)?
- How does each agronomist handle your questions?
- Do you find it easy to talk with the agronomist?
- Does the agronomist explain things clearly, fluently and in plain language that you can understand?
- Do you feel a good rapport can be developed with very good communication?

Goal: Are you satisfied that you will receive the services you require?

Crop advising philosophy

Develop a sense of each agronomist's basic philosophy about cropping systems, crop input management and yield goals to see how they compare with your philosophy. Ideally, you want the philosophy of a crop adviser to complement your own philosophy, so you can achieve a successful partnership.

Ask some questions:

- What are the agronomist's beliefs about yield goals and crop inputs – for example, do they recommend a target for optimum yield using modest inputs, or do they recommend a target for maximum yield using maximum crop inputs?
- What is the agronomist's philosophy on using low, modest or maximum inputs for achieving crop yield?
- Explore the agronomist's opinions and philosophy on crop production in comparison with your crop management and goals.

Goal: Are you satisfied the agronomist's philosophy will be a good match with your own?

Information sources, tools used and backup support

The technical aspects of crop production are constantly changing, which is one of the reasons why you are looking to hire a crop consultant. One of the issues you want to be clear about is how each agronomist you interview keeps current with new technologies, products and techniques. Ask the following:

- Is the agronomist familiar with the local and regional agronomic research being conducted by various agencies?
- How does the agronomist access local and regional research trends and results to ensure current knowledge on the newest technologies and latest agronomic recommendations from research projects?

- How does the agronomist develop recommendations for crop inputs – using information developed from local and regional research done by federal or provincial research scientists, by applied research associations or other sources?
- Does the agronomist use research results from other geographic regions in North America or other regions of the world and then apply to your local area?
- How does each agronomist stay current on new technology and keep up-to-date on issues such as new insect, weed or disease problems?
- Is the agronomist familiar with new direct seeding or precision technologies, GPS (global positioning systems) technology, variable rate technology and yield mapping? What are the agronomist's views on these technologies?
- Where does the agronomist go for backup support for problems when the cause of a problem cannot be identified (e.g. an unknown disease or insect cannot be identified) or to double-check on a diagnosis the agronomist is not quite sure of?
- Is the agronomist affiliated with other agronomists, a network or company that might be able to provide backup support on challenging issues or problems?

Goal: Are you comfortable with the agronomist's information sources, tools used and backup support?

Fees and expenses

As part of the interview process, you need to determine what the costs, fees and expenses will be for the services provided. Make sure you have a written list of services provided and not provided. Be clear about these aspects:

- What the agronomist charges on a per acre basis, and what is provided for the per acre fee?
  - soil sampling and fertilizer recommendations?
  - weekly crop scouting?
- How will you be billed?
  - one annual bill?
  - percentage payment in spring and the remainder after harvest?
  - for the time and services you have requested at the end of each month?
  - billed at an hourly rate on the service provided?
- Make sure the fee structure and payment schedule are clearly explained.
- Any additional fees or hidden costs for services that could pop up once you make a commitment?
- What the estimated total cost will be for consultation for one year compared to your potential gross and net revenue of the farm?

Goal: Do you feel the agronomist's fees and expenses are a good value for the information and services to be provided?

Summary and evaluation

After you interview the agronomist candidates, you need to evaluate and rate each individual. Here is a checklist to assist in evaluation.

To help you decide which agronomist would best meet your requirements, rate each advisor in each category using, "E for excellent," "S for satisfactory," or "U for unsatisfactory."

Rate the following categories:

_____ Education and professional training

_____ Knowledge and experience

_____ Ability to answer your questions

_____ Services offered that you require

_____ Availability each week and reporting to you during the growing season

_____ Sources of information

_____ Backup support system

_____ Reputation in the industry

_____ Fees and expenses – annual cost to the farm

Closing the deal

Finally, after you make an offer to hire, it is best to develop a written contract with the agronomist to make sure both parties clearly understand their responsibilities.

Many farmers still like to close a deal with a simple handshake; however, it is suggested that you have a lawyer prepare a simple contract including items such as the following:

1. roles of both parties
2. access to land
3. details for how the work is to be completed with the type and frequency of reporting and recommendations
4. state the sanitation procedures to be used by the advisor to ensure diseases or pests are not brought onto the farm or spread between fields
5. ownership and confidentiality of information
6. insurance and liability requirements

7. fee structure and payments for the various services
8. state who pays for materials for extra services such as sampling and laboratory analysis
9. termination of conditions including contract cancellation
10. dispute resolution process
11. signatures and dates

This factsheet is a summary of suggestions for going through the process of hiring an agronomist or crop advisor. For further information, contact the Alberta Ag-Info Centre, a toll-free call in Alberta at 310-FARM (3276).

Websites for more information

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development website: http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca

For more information on the Alberta Institute of Agrologists, the Professional Agrologist designation or a list of their members, see their website at: http://www.aia.ab.ca

For more information on the Western Canada Certified Crop Advisor Program, see their website at: http://www.prairiecca.ca/index.htm

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The authors kindly acknowledge the review of this Agdex factsheet by Alberta Agriculture staff Dr. Shelley Woods, Lethbridge, and by Harry Brook and Mark Cutts at the Alberta Ag-Info Centre in Stettler.

11/10/200