Whether shipping by river, road or rail, the soy checkoff is committed to ensuring America’s infrastructure is a significant advantage for U.S. soybean farmers. We’re looking inside the bean, beyond the bushel and around the world to keep preference for U.S. soy strong. And it’s helping make a valuable impact for soybean farmers like you.

See more ways the soy checkoff is maximizing profit opportunities for soybean farmers at unitedsoybean.org
COVER STORY
Market Merge Ahead?
Consumer food trends continue to exert influence on commodity markets, such as soybeans, while other factors tend to keep differentiated segments of the market in their own lanes.

Banking on the Future
New financial management tools and technology are being rolled out. And while some tools may be a boon to producers, new widgets are worthless without a sound business plan.

Behind Biologica
Biologica represent one of the fastest-growing segments of ag technology, and farmers need a framework for asking questions and identifying priorities to decide whether to use them.

Fostering an Agtech Ecosystem in Illinois
ISA connects Illinois soybean producers, who can reap the benefits of agtech innovations, to entrepreneurs and investors who can speed development, adoption and value.

Sustainability May Not Be Enough
The 2019 crop year reinforced the importance of making farms more resilient. For crop sectors, that means nurturing and restoring degraded soils to their full biological potential.

DIFFERENCE MAKERS
Business Climate for Illinois Producers
Shari Rogge-Fidler, CEO of Family Farms, LLC, sees a challenging business climate for Illinois soybean producers that is ripe with opportunity when the right strategies are in place.

DID YOU KNOW?
ISA is looking for Illinois applicants for the American Soybean Association (ASA) and Corteva Agriscience 2019-20 Young Leader Program, which focuses on leadership and communication and peer network development. Apply before the end of September at www.soygrowers.com.

ABOUT THE COVER
Are the lines between commodity soybean production and food soybean production becoming blurred? ISA explores the future of markets in the hands of changing consumer preferences.

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Spotlight on a Different Climate

Climate change is a frequent news headline. And while it is an important, long-term weather concern for farmers, so also is our business climate. Do we need to focus on that as well?

I would argue, yes.

Business climate is defined as the general economic environment within an industry that comprises the attitudes of various players in that industry toward business activity.

In the article, “How CEOs Should View Business Climate,” in the September 12, 2018, issue of CEO Magazine, Darin Buelow, principal and real estate and location strategy practice leader at Deloitte Consulting LLP, explains that many factors can make up and affect business climate. These include labor characteristics, the competitive environment, the regulatory environment, the cost of doing business, infrastructure, logistics and access, operating risk and quality of life.

Just as these factors affect big corporations, many of the same factors influence the soybean industry business climate. And we certainly have seen change among these factors.

In 2019, our cost of doing business, operating risk and other factors all have been challenges to our business environment. According to Brent Gloy with Agricultural Economic Insights, working capital is one of the most straightforward and useful indicators of farm sector financial conditions. It affects our costs and risks. And working capital has been on the decline since 2012.

Gloy considers working capital critically low. It is projected to fall by 25 percent from 2018 to 2019 on the heels of a 30 percent drop the previous year.

In this issue of Soy Perspectives, we share a broad and inclusive look at the financial tools that may help soybean producers manage for better business success. These tools include traditional options you may already use, along with outside-the-box ideas from the experts. The article provides practical information to address the cost of doing business and operating risk.

When it comes to infrastructure, logistics and access, read the cover story about the blurring lines we see between commodity and food production. We also take a look behind the business of biologicals and how companies determine where to focus their research for future product development.

The Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) certainly does not have all the answers to the business challenges we face, but we are evaluating them to make the most of a tough year.

On a personal note, I have enjoyed serving as ISA chairwoman for the last two years. We have made great strides in advancing the Illinois soybean industry and I know new leadership will continue along a successful pathway. Thank you for the opportunity to serve. ■

Lynn Rohrscheib | Former ISA Chairwoman

“IASA certainly does not have all the answers to the business challenges we face, but we are evaluating them to make the most of a tough year.”

Matt Herman
Don’t Let Your Social License Lapse

Building advocacy into your farm strategy helps keep you in business

> BY MIKE LEVIN, Illinois Soybean Growers director of public policy and regulatory affairs

One of the most exciting days for any 16-year-old is the one when he or she obtains a driver’s license. That small piece of laminated plastic not only provides the freedom of going places with friends, it is a gateway to bank transactions, boarding airplanes and showing proof of age.

But if we allow our driver’s license to expire, it eliminates these privileges. Not to mention it can get us in legal trouble and cost time and money to replace.

While Illinois soybean producers don’t need a laminated card to farm, you do need to maintain your social license to operate. That means advocating to protect your business.

Social license to operate has become a buzzword in recent years. It is also called social acceptability or social responsibility, and refers to how others view the credibility of what you do and acceptance of you as providers of a safe, sustainable food supply. If producers do not have these things, they are less likely to get support from regulatory agencies and lawmakers. Their “permission” is required to protect freedom to farm. And there are steps to take to protect it:

**ADOPT A LONG-TERM SOCIAL LICENSE MINDSET.** Social license to operate is developed and maintained over time through your efforts to build trust with soybean customers, those in the supply chain and your local community. Act with a mindset for the long-term.

Opportunity is ripe to engage new and developing markets that value the consistent supply of high-quality soybeans Illinois producers provide. It’s why we work hard to engage customers on the ground in Illinois, with more than 30 trade teams visiting ISA offices and leaders each year. It’s also why ISA directors visit other markets to learn firsthand about potential business opportunities.

**HAVE A CONTINGENCY TO ADDRESS PROBLEMS.** If you have an issue develop on your farm that affects your environmental status, farm quality or input use, be prepared to resolve it quickly. When others see you take the right corrective actions and share that information openly, you can better protect your social license to operate and build trust with your local community.

**ADVOCATE WITH VOICE FOR SOY.** Voice for Soy lets producers easily connect with legislators to take action and advocate for Illinois agriculture. Your input helps assure you can operate under the best legislative and regulatory environments with an easy, one-stop shop to track key issues.

**BUILD ADVOCACY INTO YOUR BUSINESS STRATEGY.** You plan for the growing season. Do the same with sharing your story. Voice for Soy Advocacy Champions share action alerts and key issues with other Voice for Soy users, and share their personal stories with lawmakers each time there’s an action alert, making a greater impact on the outcomes of critical decisions.

**JOIN ILLINOIS SOYBEAN GROWERS.** Engage with us through one of our membership options, and advocate for issues that protect your social license. Visit VoiceforSoy.org for more details.
Consumer food trends continue to exert influence on commodity markets, but some critical factors tend to keep differentiated segments of the market in their own lanes.

> BY CANDACE KREBS

The tofu made at Phoenix Bean is comparable to flavorful craft beer or small-batch artisan cheese: fresh and distinctive enough to convert a new wave of consumers who otherwise might never develop a taste for soy products into regular customers.

“We have been growing by double-digit percentages for four years, consistent with the healthy food market worldwide,” says Jenny Yang, who owns Phoenix Bean, a Chicago-based company.

According to current estimates, around 15 percent of U.S. soybean production goes into food-related uses. Artisanal food businesses like Yang’s show there’s room for growth.

Yang goes through one million pounds of soybeans a year and sells products through more than 300 grocery stores, farmers markets and restaurants, while her geographic reach continues to expand. Her interactions with millennials and even younger generations have convinced her that tomorrow’s decision-makers will be more concerned about environmental issues and responsible sourcing and generally more food aware than previous generations. They may recognize tofu is made from soymilk, not bean solids.

When Yang first bought the business 13 years ago, she had no idea how to go about getting the specialty non-GMO, organic, sustainably grown beans she wanted. She began by working through a broker, but couldn’t get the consistency she needed. Then she met a farmer from the area who was already using traditional growing practices. The two forged a cautious but increasingly collaborative relationship. It eventually grew into a valuable partnership that has continued under the next generation to run the farm.

Now Yang relies on two different farms in the Chicago area to harvest, dry down and store the beans, then deliver them to her throughout the year.

If her current suppliers disappeared tomorrow, however, she believes she’d have no problem replacing them. For one thing, she’s willing to buy from farms that are just beginning the process of transitioning to organic. For another, farmers themselves seem more willing to convert a portion of their acreage to specialty production.

NEW CONSUMER FRONTIER

According to Andy Harig, vice president for tax, trade, sustainability and policy development at the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) in Washington D.C., consumer trends appear to be pointing to a future with more identity-preserved crops, third-party verification and special labeling claims.

“FMI does an abundance of market research, but I think the challenge is knowing what the trends are and how we catch them early, versus what is a fad that is not going to have legs. That’s tough sometimes,” he says.
FMI, which represents 75 percent of the nation’s food retailers, has identified some key market drivers that appear to have staying power. They include customer personalization, transparency and social responsibility. Consumers often express values in the marketplace by seeking recommendations from third-party verifiers like Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch or The Non-GMO Project.

“According to recent research on 2019 shopper trends, 46 percent of shoppers say they look at business practices when they decide where to shop. That’s a very significant number,” says Harig.

Those expectations also color how they view the farming community as a whole. “Ten or 15 years ago, if you went up to a consumer and asked if soybeans are something people eat, they would have said no. Now you have a much better educated consumer,” he says.

Harig’s group works to convey the data it collects to grower organizations, while individual retailers are constantly relaying similar information to their suppliers.

“One thing I want to stress is that retailers’ decisions are driven by the market; these aren’t the retailers just pulling ideas out of thin air,” he says.

The same consumer trends that impact domestic markets are also emerging overseas. Bob Sinner, a fourth-generation farmer and owner of SB&B Foods in Casselton, North Dakota, believes there’s a vast market for identity preserved, food-grade specialty crops outside of the U.S. that has not been fully tapped.

“We have been growing by double-digit percentages for four years, consistent with the healthy food market worldwide.”

Jenny’s T ofu

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Growing up in Taiwan, the best childhood memories were around the dinner table sharing fresh tofu with family. Working with Illinois farmers to pick fresh soybeans that are responsibly sourced, Jenny continues a 35 year tradition of producing the finest organic tofu, soy milk and mung bean sprouts in Chicago.

JENNY YANG,
owner of Phoenix Bean, Chicago, Ill.

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY PHOENIX BEAN

“...double-digit percentages for four years, consistent with the healthy food market worldwide.”

BECK’S

We’re dedicated to doing what’s right for farmers. At our core, it’s who we are.

FARMERS AT HEART.
“What’s the focus of global agricultural trade today? Ever since 9-11, it’s all about food safety and buzzwords like traceability, sustainable and stewardship,” he says. “People around the world want to know how and where their food was produced.”

Sinner’s company handles three million bushels of food-grade soybeans a year, produced under contract by more than 250 growers. Most of what they sell is non-GMO, a market segment Sinner says is seeing consistent annual demand growth of around 15 percent.

He observes producer interest in getting closer to the end-user or food manufacturer is on the rise. While he recommends that farmers start slow and shift gradually into non-GMO production—growing practices and management requirements differ dramatically—he adds that many of his suppliers have chosen to simply switch exclusively to non-GMO.

BARRICADES TO FOOD-GRADE GROWTH

Many more would likely jump on the bandwagon if the industry could get past a few critical barriers, Sinner says. “If anything is going to affect our capacity to grow, it’s the ability to ship products in a timely basis. That is our number one issue,” he says.

Sinner’s business relies heavily on shipping containers that come into the country filled with imported consumer goods. “Before they get unloaded, they are generally headed to large metro areas like Chicago,” he says. “But our exports come out of rural areas like North Dakota. Therein lies the challenge. We have to transport our products by covered truck to containers in large metro areas or get containers to our facilities to load them.”

Sinner estimates he spends 25 percent of his time dealing with logistical issues, which are admittedly a complex problem to solve. But there’s another issue where he thinks the industry could be more proactive.

“The soybean industry, in my opinion, has not completely accepted the demands from consumers and food manufacturers worldwide that want non-GMO soybeans. We must embrace their requests and not turn our backs on them,” he says.

He believes the U.S. industry isn’t doing enough promotion in potentially lucrative markets overseas that refuse to buy GMO products. He considers that a mistake, since the U.S. already has a sterling reputation for quality that is the envy of the world.

COMMODITY SOYBEANS STILL IN PLAY

While talk of consumer trends definitely filters down to the countryside, the reality on the ground is that, to be competitive in a global market, farming has evolved into a super-efficient, commodity-driven system.

Terry Bline, manager, Roanoke Farmers Association, a grain origination cooperative in central Illinois that handles soybeans, corn and wheat, estimates about 10 percent of their beans are sold into non-GMO markets, a figure that’s remained relatively stable.

“It is something we’ve been handling for 25 years now, and I would say our volume has stayed pretty flat,” he says.

Most farmers are reluctant to enter into the market for one
main reason: weed control. “It requires a lot more manual labor,” Bline says. “With the volume and size farmers are operating at these days, they find that, for the most part to operate efficiently, they have to stay with conventional soybeans.”

Like farmers, local grain originators have to decide where to put their resources. In Roanoke’s case, the priority has been on enhancing storage and receiving capacity.

It’s likely many farmers who diversify into niche markets are going direct to the end-user—just like Yang’s suppliers—which Bline concedes is a concern for managers like him.

“That is something you worry about it—people trying to cut out as many players in the supply chain as they can,” he says. “But I think there’s probably a limit to that. There are just some people who won’t do it or who aren’t equipped to do it from an equipment or management standpoint.”

Recent spring flooding and late-planted crops and the impact of those challenges on production and trading volumes has consumed the attention of grain handlers, pushing talk of food trends or new marketing niches to the backburner, he says.

But that doesn’t mean those issues are going away any time soon, and the industry knows it. Bline says he’s constantly re-evaluating his priorities.

“Right now, we don’t see niche markets as being a place where we want to focus our energy,” he says. “But I could have a totally different opinion in a few years.”

“According to recent research on 2019 shopper trends, 46% OF SHOPPERS say they look at business practices when they decide where to shop. That’s a very significant number.”

ANDY HARIG, vice president for tax, trade, sustainability and policy development at the Food Marketing Institute (FMI), Washington, D.C.
You must gain control over your money, or the lack of it will forever control you. That’s the mantra of financial planning guru and broadcaster Dave Ramsey. Agricultural financing experts say his advice holds true, even as new financial management tools and technology are rolled out. Some tools may be a boon to producers, but new widgets are worthless without a business plan.

“Our members need structured financial management,” says Jackie Martinie, senior vice president and chief credit officer, Farm Credit Illinois in Mahomet. “Just like everything else in life, you need a plan before moving forward. A detailed business plan includes an annual budget so growers can fully understand cost of production. You can budget the enterprise overall and budget down to each farm or field if you want. The budgeting process is all about understanding the cost so you make the best decisions around inputs, cash rents and associated costs.”

Martinie relates that a budget should include detailed cash flow estimates. For most producers, a monthly cash flow is a must and contains all cash inflows and outflows like all financing activities and family living expenses. Accrual records are extremely important because they help producers make better-educated decisions compared to cash basis tax information. She says such records also paint a more accurate picture for basing the best lending decisions.

Risk management and marketing plans must be included in the business plan as well. Martinie says that a sound marketing strategy will help producers keep emotions out of decisions, stick to their plans and increase odds of making a profit.

**START AT THE RIGHT TABLE**

There was a time when meetings to launch annual plans and loan discussions between lenders, farmers and family members was initiated at the kitchen table.

Ed Elfmann, senior vice president of agriculture and rural banking policy with the American Bankers Association (ABA) in Washington, D.C., says it is time to move that to a roundtable.

“I can’t stress enough how important it is we all communicate, communicate, communicate,” Elfmann says. “All of us involved must understand where you are now and where you’re trying to go. Your accountant, lender, lawyer, seed representative, spouse, children and anyone else who may have lending obligations need to be part of your circle of advisers. We all need to be on the same page. This is a highly important practice to grow a successful business.”

Elfmann notes that excellent resources exist to help improve existing business plans or start new ones, in addition to the experts at a producer’s roundtable. They include:

- **FINBIN:** farm financial and production benchmarking information (finbin.umn.edu)
- **Illinois farmdoc:** multiple online tools and articles, budget examples, crop budgets and whole farm operational scenarios (farmdoc.illinois.edu)
- **ABA Agricultural Banking:** tips under “Press” heading (aba.com/agbanking)

“In addition to farm expenses, know your living expenses,” Elfmann says. “Not knowing what you actually spend in the household can throw off income statements and related documents. It’s easy to say a pickup is part of the farm expense, but in reality, it’s a living expense.”

**ENGAGE PROFESSIONALS**

Kurt Downs, Rabo AgriFinance senior relationship manager in Sterling, affirms experts are needed. “As operations get larger and more complicated, having a good accountant who is familiar with farming and the uniqueness that farm accounting requires is invaluable,” he says. “We encourage our clients to engage their accountants as consultants so they help prepare interim and
year-end financial statements, as well as offer financial advice and tax preparation.

“In turn, this helps farmers and ranchers ensure they get a realistic view of how their operation is performing and make better management decisions,” he adds.

Relationship banking, while not new, is important. Downs says work with lenders to strengthen relationships and to be prepared as business situations change throughout each year.

FIND NEW DATA USES

Rabo AgriFinance recently announced a partnership with Conservis to develop a tool that encompasses all stages of the growing season and translates farm production data into meaningful financial results. Currently, the Conservis platform collects and manages data from planning and budgeting, planting, input applications and costs, and post-harvest quality and inventory monitoring until the crop is sold, all using devices that currently exist.

“Our clients already have multiple data collection points on tractors, grain handling equipment and software,” Downs says. “With this partnership, we can bring all of this together into a format from which producers can make good management decisions using realistic analytical data.”

Downs says the information also is invaluable to lenders. Producers own their data and must give Rabo AgriFinance permission to view it. Permission can be revoked at any time.

“The more accurate data we can get, the more comfortable we are with it. Lending decisions are easier. It also helps us get financing in place more quickly, whether a customer is buying new equipment or land or putting up another facility,” he explains.

“It really helps when we’re setting up a new relationship with a borrower. We have to request a significant amount of information to start a relationship. If we can access the Conservis information, a few keystrokes will quickly get a lot of the material set up, saving us and the borrower a lot of time.”

FINANCIAL TOOLBOX BASICS STILL REQUIRED

Just because checks can now be deposited via smartphones, however, doesn’t mean agricultural players can let financial decorum slack. Strong relationships, sound plans and incorporating tools to get the best data possible remain cornerstones of any financial toolbox.

Martinie, Elfmann and Downs concur this won’t change soon.

“Remember, if you put together a good business plan, know your cash flow and make it through bad times, you’ll have a long-term strategy and a long-term plan when you get to good times,” Elfmann says. “All this planning helps you save some money. You’re now in position to build and expand your business.”

As Martinie puts it, "It’s structured financial management.” ■

“You can budget the enterprise overall and budget down to each farm or field if you want. The budgeting process is all about understanding the cost so you make the best decisions around inputs, cash rents and associated costs.”

- Jackie Martinie, senior vice president and chief credit officer, Farm Credit Illinois in Mahomet, Ill.

- Kurt Downs, Rabo AgriFinance senior relationship manager Sterling, Ill.

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Agricultural biologicals—inputs derived from natural materials—represent one of the fastest-growing segments of ag technology. Countless companies, from start-ups to biologicals divisions of ag chem giants, tout natural products that enhance crop growth, fight pests, improve soil health, boost plant nutrient uptake and more. And interest remains high.

“Biologicals tend to be low in toxicity and generally ‘soft’ when it comes to environmental impact,” writes Steve Savage, Ph.D., food and agriculture consultant, in his Applied Mythology blog. “They have been a rapidly growing segment of the crop protection market for some time, expanding their sales at a compound annual growth rate of around 17 percent, but biologicals still represent only around five percent of the global market for crop inputs.”

Development timelines tend to be shorter for biologicals than for synthetic chemicals, and development costs are much lower, Savage adds. “These lower barriers to entry have encouraged nearly 500 companies to participate in that five percent of the market.”

An array of technologies in the category creates endless possibilities to use properties of bacteria, fungi, viruses, insects, plants and more to support crop health, mitigate environmental stress and control pests. The potential and number of products on the market can overwhelm producers.

“Innovation is making biologicals easier to discover, more targeted, safer and more effective than ever before,” says Sarah Hovinga, Biologics Research and Development for Bayer US. “The potential in these tiny microorganisms is really endless.”

And the possibilities and potential also can overwhelm the researchers and developers tasked with discovering new products and bringing them to market.

“In our culture collection, we have more than 100,000 different strains of microbials frozen away,” Hovinga says. “We identify them, figure out ways they may work, test them and over time we can improve how they actually function.”

So how do companies decide where and how to invest in biologicals? How do they select products to join this crowded marketplace?

The answers are as diverse as the companies. A snapshot of one group demonstrates how technology and agronomics support biologicals development. It also provides a framework for producers to ask questions, identify priorities and determine how biologicals fit their operations.

Cytozyme is one example of the many companies bringing products to the agricultural biologicals space. These companies have diverse goals and proficiencies that carry through their research and development processes to the products they bring to market.

“We are at the tip of the iceberg,” adds Bayer’s Hovinga. “There is so much more to uncover. I think biologicals sourced from nature are an incredibly important innovation in agriculture.”

Looking behind the biologicals to research and development approaches can help producers integrate the innovative products that best support their profitability into their operations.
Cytozyme Solution Development

Cytozyme (www.cytozymeag.com) is a global crop solutions company headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, founded in 1975. With more than 40 years of experience, they have firmly established their approach to research and development of agricultural biologicals. For field crops, including soybeans, Cytozyme has developed biological soil, seed, foliar and fertilizer treatments, and they offer biologicals for livestock production and aquaculture.

**DEFINED VISION**

Cytozyme believes biologicals are a sustainable solution to improve production agriculture, and that mindset serves as an initial filter to identify opportunities and direct investments in research, technology and product development.

"Only about 25 percent of genetic yield potential is expressed in most crops," says Jeff Morgan, marketing manager for Cytozyme. "Stress— even undetectable stress—impacts yield and quality. We have found agriculture’s ecosystems are very inefficient compared to natural biological systems, so we look at how to take advantage of natural systems within production agriculture."

**RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Cytozyme looks at stress, growth and development on cellular and molecular levels.

"Our approach to product research and development is based on our comprehensive understanding of physiological processes," says Elizabeth Wozniak, Ph.D., managing director of research and development for Cytozyme. "To sustainably boost natural processes, we focus on understanding and improving stress responses."

Wozniak explains that stress produces common physiological responses in cells. Natural responses manage those stresses.

"All stress causes over-production of reactive oxygen species, or ROS, in cell structures," she says. "Excess ROS damages cell membranes, proteins and DNA transcription."

In plants, damage from stress like temperature, disease or water availability impacts natural processes and reduces crop yield and quality from the full genetic potential.

"Antioxidants help control and balance ROS to keep cells healthy," continues Wozniak. "Our research examines stimulating natural antioxidant production."

Her team tackles research from this angle. They listen carefully to those in production agriculture to identify challenges rooted in stress that directly impact producer profitability.

"Needs in the field direct our research," she says. "For example, we learned that it is hard for plants to take up calcium. We used our genetic knowledge and technology to figure out how to naturally stimulate plants to more efficiently absorb calcium."

Her diverse team has applied knowledge and technology from many branches of biological science to develop solutions for issues like drought stress, nutrient update and micronutrient delivery. In soybeans, they have been investigating treatments to mitigate pesticide damage, seed treatments to improve nodulation, and unique approaches to weed resistance.

**SOLUTION DEVELOPMENT**

Adam Blaszczak, Ph.D., research and development director at Cytozyme, is one member of Wozniak’s team. He applies his background in cancer research and doctorate in stress impact on proteins to identify and develop products.

"Agricultural research on biologicals is about 20 years behind the pharmaceutical industry," he says. "We are bringing pharma expertise to ag."

When a research challenge is posed, Blaszczak studies a representation of all genes to identify how relevant processes are naturally regulated.

"The secrets to increasing yield and quality are stored in the DNA of genes," he explains. "We use technology to identify genes that influence a given stress response and to determine how to increase or decrease expression of those functions with biological triggers. We fully understand why and how all of our products work."

Within each cell, DNA is transcribed to produce proteins for specific purposes, and stimulating antioxidant production to balance ROS allows this process to be more accurate and efficient. According to Blaszczak, those biological triggers become solutions to efficiently use plant energy and express full genetic potential.

"Biologicals involve hundreds to thousands of genes impacting cell functions, but we can pinpoint what functions to affect and measure how much we ‘brighten’ or ‘dim’ specific genes," Blaszczak says. "Our solutions harvest biological manufacturing results from natural processes, rather than using synthesized chemicals."

"Technology accelerates every step of the discovery and development process," he adds. "We can go from a theory to a product to test in just a couple months."

Once a solution has been developed, it is tested first in growth chambers and then greenhouses. Field testing follows. A solution that shows strong response in the field and offers value to producers, the channel and the company joins the Cytozyme product portfolio.

"We have the technology to easily screen new and existing products for additional impacts that could address other research challenges," Blaszczak says.
ADVERTORIAL

BORON – GET BETTER PERFORMANCE FROM EMERGENCE TO HARVEST

As genetic and agronomic practices continue to drive higher yield potential in soybeans, nutrient removal rates are also increasing, creating more demand for fertility. One micronutrient vital to many crops is boron, the world’s second-most deficient micronutrient, after zinc. Even though boron is only needed in small amounts, soybeans that have adequate boron throughout the entire growing season outperform those that don’t.

A JOURNEY THAT STARTS AT THE ROOT

Some of the most important plant interactions happen below the soil surface. Without a healthy root structure, uptake of water and nutrients can be hindered throughout the season. Boron is essential to fuel early-season root growth and elongation, setting soybeans up for success. Boron also impacts other physiological functions, including nitrogen fixation, structural integrity and the uptake of other important nutrients, like potassium.

Boron plays a crucial role in soybeans’ flowering and reproductive stages, impacting flower initiation and pollen development. But by the reproductive stage, sodium borate — the most commonly applied form of boron — may no longer be available in adequate amounts, due to its highly soluble form, which is susceptible to leaching. On top of this, boron cannot easily move from the leaves to other plant organs, like the flowers and pods. Therefore, since translocating boron isn’t an option, and the soil supply of sodium borate may be limited, growers hit a roadblock in crop nutrition.

But sodium borate isn’t the only option. An additional fertilizer, called calcium borate, is a more slowly soluble form which releases boron throughout the growing season. While some growers may apply foliar boron, its limited plant mobility reduces the effectiveness to only the plant tissues that foliar application touched. Applying only calcium borate, however, may not ensure adequate availability during early season growth, putting root and vegetative development at risk.

A recent study by The Mosaic Company found soybeans with sufficient levels of uniformly distributed boron more rapidly take up potassium, and ultimately increase yield compared to conventional MOP + granular boron treatments.

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A JOURNEY THAT STARTS AT THE ROOT

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Boron plays a crucial role in soybeans’ flowering and reproductive stages, impacting flower initiation and pollen development. But by the reproductive stage, sodium borate — the most commonly applied form of boron — may no longer be available in adequate amounts, due to its highly soluble form, which is susceptible to leaching. On top of this, boron cannot easily move from the leaves to other plant organs, like the flowers and pods. Therefore, since translocating boron isn’t an option, and the soil supply of sodium borate may be limited, growers hit a roadblock in crop nutrition.

But sodium borate isn’t the only option. An additional fertilizer, called calcium borate, is a more slowly soluble form which releases boron throughout the growing season. While some growers may apply foliar boron, its limited plant mobility reduces the effectiveness to only the plant tissues that foliar application touched. Applying only calcium borate, however, may not ensure adequate availability during early season growth, putting root and vegetative development at risk.

A recent study by The Mosaic Company found soybeans with sufficient levels of uniformly distributed boron more rapidly take up potassium, and ultimately increase yield compared to conventional MOP + granular boron treatments.

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Up to 60 percent of yield comes from soil fertility, but sometimes, weather will delay fertilizer application and in some cases planting, like what much of the nation has experienced the last few years. While weather may not permit spring fertilizer applications, planning for fall fertilizer options, like Aspire®, is an ideal way to ensure your soil and crops will get the nutrition needed for optimal yields.

Conduct regular soil and tissue tests to determine your boron needs. Discuss the results with your retailer to find an option that works best for your operation. For more information on what Aspire® can do for you, or to find a retailer, visit AspireBoron.com.

TWO IS BETTER THAN ONE

Either form of boron is beneficial to soybeans; however, applying only one form may not be sufficient. Fortunately, Aspire® is formulated with two forms to ensure adequate boron all season long. Its Nutriform® Technology combines potash with fast-release sodium borate and slow-release calcium borate into each granule, allowing for the flexibility to apply in the spring or fall. Additionally, Aspire provides uniform nutrient distribution across the field, unlike a traditional MOP fertilizer blended with granular boron.

In fact, a recent study by The Mosaic Company found soybeans with sufficient levels of uniformly distributed boron more rapidly take up potassium, and ultimately increase yield compared to conventional MOP + granular boron treatments.

SOYBEAN YIELD (bu/ac)

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PERCENT SOYBEANS PLANTED

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Pre-1900, improved breeding, fertility and rotational knowledge is considered the first ag revolution. Mechanization in the 1920s and the green revolution of the 1960s and 1970s are second and third. “Agriculture is going through another period of rapid change,” says Jonah Kolb, managing member of Moore & Warner Ag Group, which consults on agtech and advises ISA. “Basic precision farming is giving way to digitally-rich IoT connected agriculture, machine learning and artificial intelligence, robotics and autonomous vehicles, blockchain and distributed ledger technology, and integrated platforms that start to pull it all together.”

Huge investments in agtech are being made by the incumbents—established companies like Bayer, Syngenta, Corteva, DuPont and John Deere who look to thrive in the new era—as well as a large surge of venture capital (VC) investments in startups looking to improve how food, fiber and fuel are produced and brought to consumer markets.

In 2018, VC investments in agtech reached $17 billion, a 40 percent year-over-year increase. The incumbent companies added another $15-20 billion in new research and development for 2018. Several agrifood tech VC/private equity firms are based in Illinois. Cultivian Sandbox Ventures, S2G Ventures and Germin8 Ventures are in Chicago. Open Prairie and Serra Ventures are downstate.

Linda Kull, PhD, ISA director of ag innovation and tech transfer, says ISA supports Illinois soybean producers so they can reap the benefits of agtech innovations and so entrepreneurs and investors have access to producers to speed development, adoption and value.

The ISA checkoff program fosters an agtech ecosystem in Illinois where innovation can thrive and VC-backed startups and investors can come together with farmers, academics, industry and government decisionmakers. The ultimate goal is to help Illinois producers be the most knowledgeable, sustainable and profitable in the global marketplace and champion Illinois as an agtech hub.

“Early exposure to new ag technologies helps producers with early technology adoption to be more competitive globally,” Kull explains. “By providing grower input early, ISA helps agtech entrepreneurs hone their value proposition. We hear from agtech innovators and investors who want more access and engagement with progressive producers. They value the insights because producers are their buyers.”

As part of ISA’s agtech ecosystem efforts, Kull and her team have been building those relationships between entrepreneurs, investors, academia, government and producers. For example, ISA recently brought six progressive agtech startups to the producer-facing Tech Connect event in central Illinois.

ISA directors and leaders recently toured California to visit with Microsoft, Google X, Amazon Web Services (AWS), Farmers Business Network and Granular. Earlier in 2019, ISA was a major sponsor of the World AgriTech Innovation Summit in San Francisco. And in July, ISA was responsible for bringing the 2019 major agtech event, AgTech Nexus USA, to Chicago.
“Both the World Agri-Tech Innovation Summit and AgTech Nexus USA are major networking events for startups, entrepreneurs, accelerators and investors, and ISA ensured the farmer voice was included as speakers, panelists and participants,” Kull says. “This positions the Illinois soybean industry and farmers as leaders and a catalyst for agtech adoption—not just in Illinois, but across the Midwest.”

**ILLINOIS HAS WHAT IT TAKES**

According to Kull, a successful agtech ecosystem requires a network of assets (farm ground, technology and capital); insights (agronomic, technical and business insights from the farm); and stakeholders (farmers, entrepreneurs, investors, academics, agribusinesses and government).

Ron Meeusen, PhD, managing director at Cultivian Sandbox Ventures in Chicago, has a similar view. He says three pieces are required to support a world-class agtech ecosystem: a base of world-class technology, which is typically academic; a critical mass of investors willing to take big risks on ideas; and a critical mass of serial entrepreneurs.

“Illinois has a strong academic and tech base at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,” Meeusen says. “All the major ag chemical and seed companies have a research presence there. Now we’re beginning to develop the investor base, and that’s going fairly well.

“In addition to the new specialty funds that focus on ag and food, we’re seeing more family funds and corporations setting up venture arms here in Illinois. Illinois has a big concentration of large food companies, which are rapidly becoming players in the venture space. That brings a lot of people and a lot of talent to the space,” he continues.

As for a critical mass of serial entrepreneurs, Meeusen says Illinois isn’t quite there yet. “In Boston or Silicon Valley, you’ll find serial entrepreneurs who have already built and sold two or three companies. In the Midwest, an entrepreneur will run a company for 35 years and want their kids to take it over. The culture is a little different here.”

However, Meeusen is strongly optimistic about the current growth prospects for agtech in Illinois. “We’re not seeing a bubble—it’s growing steadily,” he says.

In July at the AgTech Nexus USA event, Meeusen facilitated a panel discussion for ISA about how new technologies can contribute to sustainability in agriculture, with a specific emphasis on soil preservation.

“Two of our investments at Cultivian are in soil sustainability. One is a remote monitoring system that goes under center pivots. It measures soil moisture every four inches and senses how deep the roots go, so you can tell how deeply you’ve watered and avoid watering past the roots,” Meeusen says. “You know when to water and when not to, so you use less water and don’t waste fertilizer.

“Our other soil sustainability investment is with a company in Germany that converts low-grade lignite coal into a soil amendment. It releases nitrogen slowly, improves soil structure just like organic matter and lasts years in the soil,” he adds. “Lignite coal is organic matter that’s 20 million years old.”

Meeusen’s firm evaluates roughly 350 new agtech opportunities every year. He’s been in agriculture for 40 years—the last 10 as a venture capitalist. He started his career during the first wave in biotech, three years before the first Bt gene was spliced into a corn plant. So, he has an informed perspective.

“This is the most exciting time I can remember,” he says. “Agtech is moving as fast as tech is in any other area. There are lots of new tools coming farmers’ way that they can try.”

Kull is excited to see an Illinois agtech ecosystem gel. “ISA is dedicated to making it happen faster in Illinois. It’s not about any one agtech company or solution—it’s about creating a culture of innovation with value creation at the farm level and ensuring Illinois farmers thrive in a changing world.”

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Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff
Sometimes maintaining the status quo isn’t good enough. The agribusiness community increasingly recognizes it’s no longer sufficient to merely sustain farmland in its current state. Instead, crop sectors seek to nurture and restore degraded soils to their full biological potential. And momentum is building around this concept of regenerative agriculture.

Proponents and early adopters point to an array of benefits. Among them are more profitability, better farm resiliency to extreme weather events, improved water utilization, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, better food quality and increasingly preferred supplier status.

And it goes beyond soil health. It’s a conservation and rehabilitative approach to farming systems that focuses on topsoil regeneration, increasing biodiversity, improving the water cycle, supporting biosequestration and increasing ability of land to persevere through climate change.

The 2019 crop year has reinforced the importance of making farms more resilient. “We don’t get an inch of rain anymore, we get four inches,” says Jason Mauck. He has adopted regenerative practices like relay intercropping on portions of his 3,000 acres in east central Indiana.

What regenerative means for farmers and food system stakeholders is in flux, says David LeZaks, who leads regenerative food system projects for Delta Institute, a Chicago-based nonprofit identifying market-based solutions to environmental, social and economic challenges.

“People often think of regenerative agriculture from strictly an agronomic standpoint, in terms of soil, water, biodiversity and nutrient flows,” he says. “That’s accurate, but there are also broader definitions that factor in the socio-economic benefits of regenerative farming systems.”

POTENTIAL FOR GREATER PROFITABILITY

LeZaks says the body of research and data surrounding regenerative agriculture shows it can be more profitable. “More money is staying on the farm and with the farmer. It’s improving agronomic and farm financial outcomes, while bolstering the economies of rural communities and providing a broad range of environmental benefits,” he explains.

Potential for increased profitability stems from a combination of things, including more stable yields and lower input costs. “We’re also starting to see some supplemental or alternative revenue streams come into regenerative farming systems,” adds LeZaks. “They’re not mature yet, but carbon, water and biodiversity markets are emerging that can pay farmers to provide some of these ecosystem services. Crops and livestock that come from these systems usually have a differentiated quality, and farmers can capture that additional value.”

LeZaks was a lead author of Soil Wealth: Investing in Regenerative Agriculture Across Asset Classes, a report published by Croatan Institute, Delta Institute and the Organic Agriculture Revitalization Strategy in July. It covers a major, three-year project on innovative mechanisms for financing regenerative agriculture funded through a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant.
The report finds increasing urgency of addressing climate change bolsters a mounting interest in regenerative ag and carbon farming. A subset of investors demonstrates increased interest in financing not simply “sustainable” agriculture, but agriculture deemed explicitly “regenerative.”

Kristine Nichols, Ph.D., a soil microbiologist and founder of KRIS Systems Education and Consultation, has focused her research on the impacts of cropping and grazing systems on soil microbiology, nutrient cycling and soil aggregation to improve soil health and water quality. Her most recent work involves mycorrhizal fungi. A recap can be found at ILSoyAdvisor.com.

“Early on, I became fascinated with how a microscopic fungus that already exists in the soil could actually help to change the way plants grow,” says Nichols. “And not only help the plant get nutrients and water, but aid in disease resistance and essentially help plants engineer the soil structure, which is important for reducing erosion and soil loss. Without regenerative practices, soil is not a resource that’s easily renewed.”

Nichols has done the math on vast topsoil losses in the U.S. Based on the latest USDA data available, she says in 2014 the country lost 1.6 billion metric tons of topsoil.

“If you loaded that amount of soil into boxcars, the length of the train to hold all of it would circle the globe seven times,” she says. “That’s just one year. Our agricultural productivity is in severe jeopardy if that continues.”

Nichols believes farmers and ranchers are beginning to feel a convergence of economic, pest and disease pressures on top of weather and market pressures. “They see some of the chemical tools they’ve been putting in place for the last 40-50 years just aren’t working anymore,” she says.

“But farmers by nature are individuals who always look for ways to improve their systems,” she continues. “They’re innovators. And that’s why we see more farmers begin to implement regenerative systems. Practices like no-till and strip-till, none of those innovations would have happened without farmers driving them.”

LeZaks agrees farmers are leading the way. “These sets of practices, to rebuild and regenerate soils and build resilience, weren’t introduced by corporations, government agencies or brands. They were borne out of necessity, and, in some cases, desperation by farmers.”

**NEW SUPPLY CHAIN INITIATIVES PROVIDE REGENERATIVE FUEL**

Meanwhile, new initiatives from food manufacturers are emerging and government programs that support regenerative farming are being explored.

In March, General Mills announced an initiative to advance regenerative agriculture practices on one million acres of farmland by 2030. The company plans to partner with both conventional and organic farmers in key growing regions to drive adoption of such practices.

“We recognize our biggest opportunity to drive positive impact for the planet lies within our own supply chain, and by being a catalyst to bring people together to drive broader adoption of regenerative ag practices,” says Jeff Harmening, chairman and CEO of General Mills.

General Mills recognized the global food system contributes to climate change, with estimates indicating it accounts for roughly one-third of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 70 percent of water consumption. The company said it will partner with key suppliers to drive regenerative practices across key crop ingredients and conduct on-farm training and education academies.

Danone North American, producer of Dannon yogurt, also announced a new soil health initiative to identify ways to help regenerate soils and enhance organic matter and soil fertility. Danone will work with participating growers, dairy farmer partners and third-party soil health experts on soil sampling, data collection and analysis, and sponsor soil health best practices field days.

**INVESTMENT CAPITAL ON THE HORIZON**

Soil Wealth: Investing in Regenerative Agriculture Across Asset Classes also looked at where dollars flow from the investment community into agriculture, specifically in the sustainability and regenerative side, and to identify gaps in funding.

“We’re identifying where there isn’t enough capital to support some of these activities and how we might do that differently,” says LeZaks. “USDA is supporting our work because they clearly know the amount of money budgeted for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program isn’t enough.”

The report identified 127 U.S.-focused investable strategies with combined assets of $321.1 billion that integrate sustainable food and ag thematically or as criteria in the investment process.

On the farm side, regenerative farmer Mauck would like to see more incentives for farming practices that restore soil health and deliver public benefits beyond just food, fuel and fiber.

“Our country is so worried about our roads and infrastructure, but we forget about our soils,” he says. “They’re starting to talk about carbon credits and those types of things. But as we do more research on organic matter and carbon sequestration, tracking key performance indicators, paying farmers for sinking carbon, and increasing land productivity is going to be more important than anything for the next generation. We’ve got to get things structured that way.” □

**Engineering the soil structure is important for reducing erosion and soil loss. Without regenerative practices, soil is not easily renewed.**

**PHOTO BY JASON MAUCK**

**FUNDED BY THE ILLINOIS SOYBEAN CHECKOFF**
What would happen if someone came up with the next generation of digital ag, robotics, data systems, genetically modified seed and equipment that radically outperformed yours and cost half as much? Someone is going to start a revolution that disrupts your industry. Why can’t it be you?

In a world where everyone and everything around you is getting better, where technology waits for no one, and where a smarter, more sophisticated consumer or regulator wants transparency, traceability and accountability, people ask, “What’s new, what’s next?”

Add to this, the effects of climate change on crop growth, diminishing water resources and threat of overpopulation, and you see innovation isn’t just essential to business growth, it is crucial to our way of life. Here are some ideas for accelerating innovation:

**Be hungry for change.** In the next 24 months, your organization will change and you will change. The question is: Will these changes be crisis-driven or opportunity-led? A culture of innovation is one where people are hungry for change because they want to establish rules their competitors must follow to play the game.

**Question the unquestionable.** Think like an outsider. Challenge your taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the soybean industry works, about what your competitors are doing, about your customer’s expectations, and about how technology is going to disrupt business. Kodak, Blockbuster and Blackberry failed to question the unquestionable.

**Go to the intersection of trends to find opportunities.** Pay attention to early warning signs that precede major cultural, societal and market shifts. You can’t win with yesterday’s ideas, so what are the big, converging trends headed your way? There is white space where rising trends intersect and massive opportunity for innovation. Where do agtech trends intersect? How will they turn data into predictions, prescriptions and actionable insights to increase yield, lower input costs and reduce environmental impact?

**Elevate the conversation to outcomes.** Precision Ag 2.0 will move the discussion from the features and functions of new technology to outcomes growers want. With precision ag, many growers feel like they drink from a fire hose. “What solutions are best? How do these solutions integrate? How will it change my operation? And, is the return worth the investment?” The downside to not getting this right can be significant.

What are the implications for the supply chain? Equipment dealers must shift from selling horsepower and torque to selling the power of precision ag and a high-touch approach to help growers implement it. Agronomists will be technologists teaching producers how to use technology and make sense of it in real-time. Tech companies won’t invent in a vacuum, they will focus on how solutions seamlessly integrate with the larger ecosystem.

**Navigate the messy middle.** Adopting new tech and new approaches does not follow a neat linear line. There is a messy in-between that includes starts and false starts, limited resources, organizational and global politics, regulatory constraints, environmental impacts and more. Uncertainty creates fear. No one likes to feel incompetent. Everyone in the supply chain who wants to adapt must get comfortable feeling uncomfortable.

Nearly all worthwhile change starts with discomfort, with feeling incompetent. However, we mistake temporary hardship and a sense of clumsiness when we try a new approach for something permanent. We get the feeling it could last forever, but it doesn’t.

If you want to up your game, find the courage to feel incompetent again. If you dig in, are willing to be coached and slug through the messy middle, you will get smarter and better. The alternative is to pretend precision ag won’t affect you for a while and watch denial drag you into a slow, downward spiral toward irrelevance.

Change is a choice. Fear may resent it; denial may ignore it; ignorance may deride it and self-interest may distort it. But it is inevitable. What you do with it is your choice.
ISA Teams Up With Global AgInvesting to Showcase Future Technology

ISA checkoff program sponsorship brought the AgTech Nexus USA conference to Chicago and brought investors, entrepreneurs, producers and other stakeholders together to showcase the future of agtech. One unique aspect of the event was a field demonstration from Rowbot Systems, a company planning to address variable application of inputs like nitrogen or cover crop seeding in large row crop fields with automated Rowbots.

USB Project Sets Stage for Mississippi River Dredging

The United Soybean Board (USB) and several other soybean groups are funding environmental assessments, research and education of deepening the Mississippi River ship channel near the Port of New Orleans. The project sets the foundation needed to improve the draft of the lower Mississippi from 45 to 50 feet. According to the Soy Transportation Coalition, the change would increase the competitiveness of U.S. soybean exports. The current depth of 45 feet on the lower Mississippi River is typically dredged to at least 47 feet to ensure vessels do not hit the bottom of the riverbed. Deepening the channel to 50 feet will allow a load increase from 68,000 metric tons to 78,000 metric tons, saving up to $20 per metric ton when loading greater volumes onto one ship. The savings are expected to translate to a margin of 13 cents per bushel for barge river elevators exporting soybeans and increase revenues by $461 million.

ISA Seeks Applicants for ASA Young Leader Program

ISA is looking for Illinois applicants for the American Soybean Association (ASA) and Corteva Agriscience 2019-20 Young Leader Program before the end of September. The two-phase educational program is for actively farming individuals and couples who are passionate about the future possibilities of agriculture. Phase I of the program takes place in Indianapolis, Dec. 3-6. The program continues Feb. 25-29, 2020, in San Antonio, Texas, in conjunction with the annual Commodity Classic Convention and Trade Show. Participants must attend both events.

The agenda focuses on leadership and communication, the latest agricultural information and the development of a strong peer network. Spouses, even those who are not employed full-time on the farm, are encouraged to attend and will be active participants in all elements of the program. For more information or to apply online by Sept. 30, visit www.soygrowers.com.

ISA Communicates Scheduled Illinois Waterway Closures

The Illinois Waterway this summer began to receive much-needed major rehabilitation and lock repairs, starting with two locks on the Illinois River. ISA has been working with transportation and waterway stakeholders to manage the temporary closure impact on farmers and shipping.

Additional coordination will take place during a four-month rehab and repair span in 2020, when the waterway will likely average 13.3 million tons of cargo passing through the locks. Other transport modes will help manage freight during the closures. Long-term benefits of maintenance and repairs to the Illinois Waterway are expected to outweigh the temporary inconveniences. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expects an increased infrastructure lifespan of 25 years.

Illinois Researchers Study Soy Health Benefits in Swine Diets

Researchers from the University of Illinois are studying how new regulations are changing what is known about animal diets and how soybeans can improve them. It is possible soy’s effects may be masked by routine use of in-feed antibiotics. But with the advent of the U.S. Veterinary Feed Directive, producers are wondering what alternatives are out there.

Ryan Dilger, associate professor, notes previous research shows soy isoflavones and saponins have anti-viral, anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant effects on a cellular level and promote growth and help pigs return to health faster after PRRSV infection. Brooke Smith, graduate researcher in the Veterinary Medical Scholars Program, is launching a long-term study to isolate the effects of isoflavones on pigs infected with the PRRS virus. Dilger and Smith are optimistic about the potential of soy-derived isoflavones and saponins as growth and health promoters. They suggest there could be a future in which pigs are fed a greater proportion of soybean meal or other specialized soy products at an earlier stage after weaning.

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Soybean Leadership Academy
> January 8-10 • Orlando, FL

Commodity Classic
> February 27-29 • San Antonio, TX

Calendar of Events

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“Ultimately, your business is not about you. It’s about the customers you serve. So even if you have the best product or service in the world, it’s not going to matter if it doesn’t ultimately meet your customers’ needs or solve a problem for them.”


“Business is all about the customer: what the customer wants and what they get. Generally, every customer wants a product or service that solves their problem, worth their money, and is delivered with amazing customer service.”

FABRIZIO MOREIRA | Former Ecuadorian politician, Current U.S. businessman

“Even the most comprehensive business climate review will still only represent a snapshot. CEOs should have the expectation that every business climate factor will likely change over time. Labor costs in emerging markets are likely to rise, tax and trade policies are subject to change, and new customers in remote geographies need to be served. Moreover, as organizations evolve their business process and make strategic transactions, the importance an organization puts on business climate factors will likely change as well. For example, vertical integration may reduce the importance of being in a strong industry cluster, and outsourcing an IT function may reduce the need to have a high-skilled local labor force.”

DARIN BUELOW | Deloitte Consulting LLP, Chief Executive, September 2018

“The nature of the global business environment guarantees that no matter how hard we work to create a stable and healthy organization, our organization will continue to experience dramatic changes far beyond our control.”

MARGARET J. WHEATLEY | American author and management consultant

“Prosperous farmers mean more employment, more prosperity for the workers and the business men of every industrial area in the whole country.”

PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

“Terms set at the beginning of a business relationship may not stay favorable to both parties for the entirety of that relationship, especially when other entities try to horn their way into the picture. As a business owner, it’s important to think of business relationships almost as though they are plants which would die from neglect. If that means sitting down occasionally with business partners and seeing how they feel about the present terms, that’s what must be done.”

“Building Loyalty in a Changing Business Climate,” Information Age, February 2018

“Almost everything worthwhile carries with it some sort of risk, whether it’s starting a new business, whether it’s leaving home, getting married, or whether it’s flying in space.”

CHRIS HADFIELD | Astronaut

“The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.”

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

“After you’ve done a thing the same way for two years, look it over carefully. After five years, look at it with suspicion. And after ten years, throw it away and start all over.”

ALFRED EDWARD PERLMAN | 1900s U.S. railroad executive

“With more digital processes and options available, we’ll start to rely less on paper forms that previously cluttered your office and slowed your business processes. This will enable you to do more with less, while reducing the risk of human error and lost documentation. Digitizing much of your business also means you can utilize more security tools to protect the data within files and documents much better than if you were still relying on paper.”

PETER DAISYME | Due special adviser, Forbes CommunityVoice, 2017
WHAT ARE THE TOP OPPORTUNITIES FOR ILLINOIS FARMERS IN THIS ECONOMY?

Opportunities include reaching out/partnering for best practices, ideas and actions; positioning operations for the next several years; and finding and seizing market opportunities. Despite challenges, the market is ripe with opportunities for farms positioned to take advantage of them.

WHAT GENERAL STRATEGIES OR SOLUTIONS WOULD POSITION FARMERS FOR FUTURE SUCCESS?

We advise clients to get their financial houses in order, choose the business strategy/business model that fits them and scale, differentiate or diversify to connect to market opportunities; and finally to ensure sufficient family conversations and role definitions. We partner with families to help them implement these solutions.

HOW DOES FAMILYFARMS GROUP WORK WITH FARMERS TO MANAGE FOR THE FUTURE?

We are a member-based peer network focused on innovative business solutions for family farms. In the past, we focused on helping farms grow. However, our new vision is to help farms define their best business strategies, which might mean staying the same size, but diversifying or differentiating. Each farm has a personal coach to help create an action plan and implement it.

It’s easy to find ideas, but the challenge is in putting them into action on the farm and that is our strength. We help families work together to define their roles for maximum effectiveness. Our MyFarmCoach mobile platform provides a powerful and convenient tool for family and other team members to stay connected as they join forces to implement their action plans.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CURRENT BUSINESS CLIMATE FOR ILLINOIS PRODUCERS?

This is an extremely challenging climate for ag businesses in Illinois and across the Midwest. Ongoing low commodity prices, coupled with some uncertainty around trade policies and a very wet spring, have created a situation that some farmers will have difficulty surviving. Producers are faced with myriad issues and choices related to prevented planting, late planting, insurance coverage, yield averages and more.

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY CHALLENGES YOU SEE FACING ILLINOIS PRODUCERS?

Two key areas of challenge are legacy and profitability. We’re told 70 percent of farmland is predicted to change hands in the next 20 years. Long-term success across multiple generations will be a challenge, with fewer young people coming back to the family farm. We must prepare a new generation of young farmers to come in with a passion for farming, an expanded skillset and a business mindset. At the same time, farming is evolving with new technology and rapidly changing consumer demands. Producers scramble to keep up, build a profitable business for the next generation and gain consumer trust through transparency regarding food production.

Shari Rogge-Fidler is CEO of Family Farms, LLC, which was formed in 2006 and currently represents more than 1,000 family farming operations and 1.7 million acres of farmland. Family Farms, LLC is a member-owned peer network of independent producers located across the U.S. and in Canada. One of five entities making up Family Farms, LLC, the purpose at FamilyFarms Group is “Keeping Families on the Farm.” Focused on helping members build profitable and sustainable farm businesses, FamilyFarms Group helps clients discover innovative business solutions through training, resources and services in financials, tax, agronomics, human resources, crop insurance and more to help build a valuable and lasting farm legacy.
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