VALLEY

GROWER PROFILE

CASE IN POINT

LOCATION:
Ewing Farms Inc.
Big Lake, Minn.

SITUATION:
- 1,400 acres of sandy soil, all irrigated

CHALLENGE:
- Meet precise moisture requirements of red potato crop to ensure maximum marketability

DEPLOYMENT:
- 30 center pivots
- AgSense® irrigation monitors and rain guages on 13 pivots

EFFECT:
- High-quality crop
- Fewer trips to monitor remote pivots

AgSense Monitoring Helps Minnesota Grower Produce Top-Quality Potatoes

Irrigation is important for many growers, but some crops have more demanding moisture requirements than others. Pete Ewing, a second-generation potato farmer near Big Lake, Minnesota, has found that red potatoes are picky about getting the right amount of water.

"People buy red potatoes by appearance," Pete explains. "They want them to look pretty. We're on fairly sandy soil here, and watering is very important. There is no forgiveness on it. If the weather conditions are wrong and you miss your irrigation by a day, it can severely hurt the coloring, the quality and the smoothness of your crop. If you're not right on, you're wrong."

Ewing Farms Inc. has a packing plant and cooling space on site and employs 40 to 50 seasonal workers during the harvest season, which lasts from July 20 until mid-October. Most of their potatoes are shipped to the East Coast. Part of the crop goes into 5-pound bags for grocery store sales and the rest is packed into 50-pound boxes for food service businesses in New York.

"Those fancy restaurants want the fancy red potatoes. Sometimes they'll put four or five little potatoes on your plate, and they want the bright red color," Pete says.

During the growing season, Pete pays close attention to the irrigation at Ewing Farms. It was a challenge to stay on top of things before he started using AgSense more than ten years ago. "Some of our farms are about 20 miles away from our base and it was impossible to get to them as often as I wanted to," he recalls. "Before AgSense, I spent a lot more time making trips to those fields."

"With AgSense, I can get up in the morning, look at my cell phone and say, 'Okay, it's running.' I can wait until the vines dry off and then go out and scout the fields. I can plan my day instead of the irrigators planning my day for me," Pete says.

AGSENSE

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Pete uses AgSense primarily to start, stop and monitor his pivots as well as monitor rainfall. “I do about 99 percent of it on my phone. The only time I use my PC is when I have to go in and do any of the main settings. To be honest, Kelan does probably 90 percent of that for me.” Kelan Buchta is Pete’s dealer at Grand Irrigation in Clear Lake, Minnesota.

Within the last year, Pete has noticed some big improvements in the AgSense user interface: “Until about a year ago, you could only tell it to do one thing at a time. Now you can enter them all in, hit the ‘send’ button, and it takes care of four or five things at once. AgSense is very simple to use.”

During the planting and growing season, Pete works alongside four other people. “My dad, Jim, is 72 and semi-retired but still actively involved. My brother, Willy, is four years younger than I am. My older son, Nathan, is 21. Our other full-time guy also is 21 and has been a friend of the family for many years.” Pete’s wife Brenda does most of the bookkeeping and bill paying for the farm. Pete and Brenda also have two younger children: a 13-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old son.

With two kids still in school, Pete appreciates being able to monitor pivots remotely. “AgSense gives me some freedom. My wife and I can go to our daughter’s volleyball games and our son’s activities. If we want to get away for a night, we can do that and still have a pretty good pulse on what’s going on at the farm.”

The bottom line, though, is that AgSense helps Pete ensure that his potatoes receive exactly the right amount of moisture during the growing season. When you’re irrigating red potatoes, Pete says, “It all comes down to timing. You’re putting a lot of money in the ground every year, and there’s no room for error.” Pete’s investment in AgSense pays off with every harvest.

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