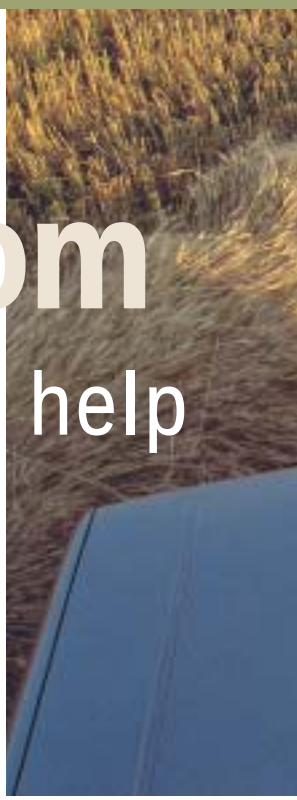
It's worth the trip to log on to www.mmpp.com

# If you're benchmarking for success

## management plus can help



by Laura Rance, Farmers' Independent Weekly

When it's time to prepare his lessons for students studying agriculture at the University of Manitoba, hardly a week goes by when agronomy instructor Gary Martens isn't tapping a question into the Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation's Management Plus website.

"I love this database. It is fantastic," says Martens. "I am so grateful it is there."

For Martens, www.mmpp.com is a powerful teaching tool. But he also wants his students familiar with using it as a research resource.

"In crop production class, the information I used today was, 'what have been the yield increases for wheat and canola in Manitoba over time?,'" he said. "I asked the students, 'how did we get those yield increases, what were the various factors?'"

In his weed management class, Martens recently used the database to help students explore the types of herbicides typical Manitoba farmers use in edible beans. "You can use it as a benchmark to see where you should start," he said.

Whether his students return to the farm or work in some agriculturally related field, Martens believes making them comfortable with using the MMPP database could be one of the life-long lessons of their university education.

It offers management benchmarks to farmers, but it can also help a sales agronomist study up on the management practices and product usage in his or her market area. It also helps manufacturers determine how the competition's products are doing relative to their own.

The possibilities are endless. "And it's free," he says. All that's needed is access to the Internet and an enquiring mind.

Doug Wilcox, manager of agronomy and program development for the Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation, says the Management Plus website gives the information farmers provide in their crop management histories back to them as a management tool. "In recent years, this data has been obtained from over 90 per cent of the land in this province," he said.

It started with a pilot project offered to farmers in one municipality in 1993. By 1995, it was providing hard copy information province-wide and by 1996 it was available on the website.

Wilcox said its main advantage is the reference points it provides in the midst of all the other market and social pressures swaying farmers' decisions.

"By providing access to this meaningful yield, production and management benchmark information, Manitoba producers no longer have to rely on coffee shop testimonials or marketing hype; they can now turn to the MMPP for answers," says Wilcox.

The database contains:

- regional yields and acreage by variety;
- regional fertilizer rate by crop and yield response by soil type;
- regional pesticide usage and yield response by crop:
- seeding date influence on yields;
- crop rotation impact on yields;
- various maps, such as herbicide resistance risk, causes of loss by region, average individual productivity index by township, and crop atlas information.

Bombarded with new varieties from which to choose? Run a few varietal names through the database, selecting out your specific area. It will tell you which of the varieties grown by farmers in your area performed the best.

Considering a few acres of a crop you've never grown before? So what are the farmers already growing that crop in your area using for inputs? How has that crop performed for them?

"Then they take out these numbers and pencil in their own numbers into a budget," Wilcox said. They can compare that to Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiative's crop production costs to see if they are in the same ballpark.

### Thinking of buying a farm?

Are you a foreign farmer thinking of relocating to Manitoba and wondering whether the land you have your eye on will really live up to the realtor's claims? What has been the experience of other farmers in the area?

Are you an industrialist thinking of locating a strawboard plant in the province? How much wheat is grown in the region around a potential site?

Wilcox said farmers use this data to compare their operations to area averages. And if their results are different, their it allows them to dig a little deeper to identify differences in how inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides are applied. That has the potential to improve their own yields and profitability — and reduce the risk of loss claims to MCIC.

"I use the website all the time when I am preparing presentations or answering a specific question," says Scott Day, a provincial agricultural representative in Boissevain and farmer. "I use it to get crop acre numbers such as total bean acres for

this crop risk area stuff like that, or trends in Barrie wheat acres in this area," he said.

But Day takes what he sees in the database with a grain of caution. "I don't use it for specific variety yield data all that much because it is not scientific and I make that clear with farmers that I may share the data with. A new variety of almost anything will usually have a higher yield in Management Plus because it is usually the seed growers that are putting it on their best land to get seed multiplication. Lower acreages of the new crops will also favour higher yields over the large acreages of the established varieties," he notes.

## One of several tools

Wilcox is the first to concede the MMPP database shouldn't be taken as gospel or a farmer's only source of information when making a production decision. "It's typically used to complement other data sources," he said.

For starters, it's historical. The latest data currently available is for the 2002 growing season. So it won't necessarily keep up with crops such as soybeans, which are rapidly gobbling up acres in the province.

When assessing a new variety, farmers could compare the MMPP data, which reflects an average of what happened on farms with *Seed Manitoba* data, based on the MCVET small plot trials. Then they must balance that against their own management style. "You have to put it in the right perspective," he said.

"Top producers are always looking for weakness in their enterprise and trying to improve its contribution to their bottom line," he said.

If they are considering change, the MMPP database allows farmers to implement that change on paper using real numbers before they start making costly and potentially risky investments.

What the MMPP database won't do is divulge information on a specific parcel of land, which protects the privacy of the information farmers provide.

Farmers considering buying or renting a piece of land can however negotiate directly with the land owner if they want to see its crop management history — which may offer clues as to what management issues — such as low fertility or herbicide resistant weeds — their potential acquisition might harbour.

It's straightforward, user-friendly and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

But it won't do the thinking for you. Wilcox cautions farmers against looking to the website for answers. It won't tell you how to maximize profitability. But it could make that job a little easier.

# Try it once and you'll be hooked

It doesn't take a computer scientist — or even an agricultural representative — to get MMPP working for you.

Yet many farmers are still daunted by doing their own research online. They rely instead on agricultural representatives and input suppliers to advise them on management decisions.

Both can be valuable sources of information. But if nothing else, doing a little of your own analysis first allows you to critically assess the information given to you by others.

"Basically, all you need is Internet access," says Doug Wilcox, manager of agronomy and program development for the Manitoba Crop Insurance Corporation.

That means either owning your own computer or getting access to one, and it should be a system that has a relatively new version of the Internet Explorer or Netscape software. (System 5 or higher is preferable.)

Then log on and use your Internet browser to go to: www.mmpp.com.

From the Management Plus website's Home page, you have options. If you are interested in tapping into some data, click on the "data and maps" icon on the index.

"Then you pick the tool most applicable to your needs," says Wilcox.

- Select the regions that you wish to include in the query.
- Select the crops that you wish to include in the query. When selecting crops, the browser will automatically refresh to show a list of varieties. Only one crop is allowed if you wish to specify a variety.
- Select the crop varieties that you wish to include in your query. Varieties can only be specified if a single crop is selected.
- Select the start and end years that you wish to include in your query.
- Select the number of rows to return at one time. A maximum of 250 rows can be returned at one time.
- Choose how you want your results delivered, in ascending or descending order in a spreadsheet format.