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FARMING IN ARGENTINA – FARMERS CREA GROUPS

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Abstract

The past decades has shown the importance of technology in improving farmers output, maintaining efficiencies and a sustainable production. Production of all grains has grown, and so has the demand for this grain, as feed, food and fuel and other minor uses.

The farmers in Argentina have been known for adapting technology, soft and hard, in a very short period. The main technologies which were adopted at a very fast pace were the practices of no till, today close to 70% of the cropland is managed under this technology, Argentina embraced at a very early stage the use of genomics technology in seed, and thus it was the second country to plant round ready soybean seed, currently close to 80% of the corn seed is biotechnology and close to 99% of the soybean seed used is biotechnology. Another technology being quickly adapted has been the use of silo bags to store grain, currently close to 30% of the Argentine crop is stored this way, which is over 30 million tons. The creation of a second planting window in corn, is also a major change to production by lowering the production risk. The CREA groups have been an important tool in promoting these technologies and helping farmers network, and improve their production.

The first CREA group was formed in 1957 between farmers trying to harness wind erosion in western Buenos Aires province. By 1960, there were enough groups to form an association, and thus in March 1960 AACREA, the CREA group's national organization was born.

Today, over 50 years later, there are close to 210 groups, formed by close to 2.000 members, working in most of Argentina's growing regions.

The essence of these peer groups is to improve the way production is carried out in each region, through benchmarking, field tests, and working closely with Universities, and research institutions such as INTA, our National Agricultural Research Institute. The knowledge and technology developed is not proprietary and is shared among other farmers and students.

The networking and the importance given to sharing knowledge and experience has been a relevant issue in the growth in numbers of the association.

The groups consist of up to 12 farmers, who meet monthly on each farm, and discuss relevant issues put forth by the host. Information is shared and benchmarked and field tests are planned with enough data to run statistical analysis on it. Depending on the area the group is from, it may focus on crops, fruit trees, cattle, wine, etc.

Each group has an advisor, a professional usually a Vet or Agronomist, and is paid by the group for 10 days work consisting mainly on bringing new information to the group, collecting and analyzing data and information (production and financial information), and

helping execute the yearly plan put forth by the group. The advisor meets for a full day, once a month with the advisors of the other groups in the region, and this meeting is coordinated by another advisor, who represents the advisors of the region. This Coordinator meets once a month for a full day with the Coordinators of the other 17 regions. This constitutes a very strong network of technical information.

The regions advisor, usually an agronomist or Veterinary, executes the regions annual plan set forth by the farmer's group representative and the advisors. These usually are about field trials on use of inputs, new technology being developed, ongoing farmer and advisors learning through talks or short courses. The Coordinator must also interact with research institutions and Universities.

Each group is chaired by a member for two years, and is not allowed back till all members have chaired the group. The group Chair must help in organizing the group meetings, and spend a full day with the chairs of the other groups in the region. A representative of the region, a farmer, is chosen as a Vocal, and he must meet twice a month with the Vocal farmers from the other 17 regions. Thus a very strong network is formed between farmers.

The strength of peer groups organized this way is the very strong network between farmers, with advisors, with research and teaching institutions, and other farmer groups. Another advantage is the power to analyze new technology. Sometimes a farmer or a group of farmers is too small to analyze technology. In this case either the region or the association can get involved and generate sufficient critical mass for a special issue.

An example of this is the project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) of the USA, between AACREA, the University of Miami, the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions based out of the University of Columbia, to study the "Interactions between changing climate and technological innovations in agricultural decision-making: implications for land use and sustainability of production". This project was developed between 2007 and 2010.

With the University of Buenos Aires, the School of Agronomy and AACREA developed a decision making models for wheat fertilization, based on climate, soil type, water content of soil at planting and wheat variety, where working with probabilities the farmer can evaluate the application of nitrogen where he feels comfortable based on costs, income and expected production. This model is currently used by faculty at the University and is available to everybody.

Currently most members are working on best crop rotations, planting dates for corn, chemical use, carbon sequestration, input use, site specific agriculture, etc.

The CREA groups know that to be competitive they must strive to improve networking, sharing best business practices and generating a quick and sound model for technology adoption.

Keywords: farming, farmers CREA Groups, Argentina