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Nebraska Cooperative Extension NF 96-260



Farmers' Use of Crop Consultants in Nebraska

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Crop consultants assist farmers in making better management decisions by providing advice on a variety of topics. Through the scouting of fields for insects and disease during the growing season they provide a farmer with information and recommendations about when potential economic losses warrant treatment. Consultants may collect soil samples for their clients and provide recommendations for the application of fertilizers. In addition many consultants provide irrigation advice and are developing expertise in the emerging field of precision farming activities.

In a survey of Nebraska farmers, some questions were asked about the use of crop consultants during the 1994 crop year. The farmers who responded to this survey were demographically similar to the population surveyed which suggests the sample is representative of this population.

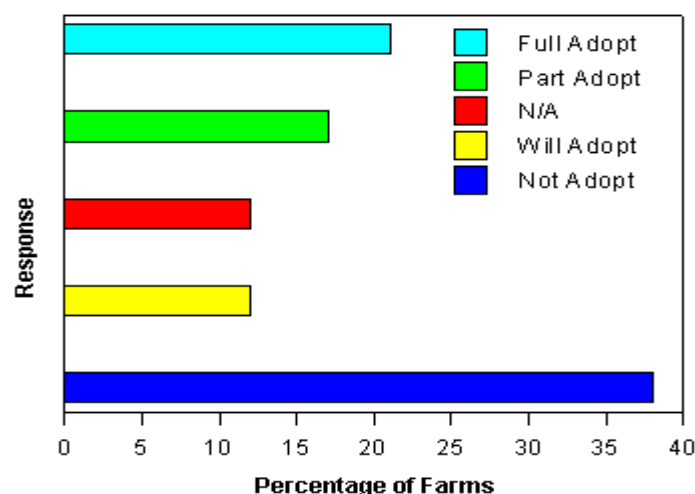
The data on the use of crop consultants need to be interpreted with care, however, because some farmers hire a crop consultant for only part of their acreage while managing the rest of it themselves following the consultants recommendations. These farmers may have reported full adoption even though they were enrolled and paying a crop consultant only on part of their land.

The results of the survey indicate the proportion of farmers who are using crop consultant services of one kind or another. These data provide some insight on the hiring of these services or future plans for adoption of these services. This has implications for extension education programming. Survey results for the 1994 crop year indicate that many

Figure 1. All Farms

Nebraska producers were using crop consultants for some services. The most widespread use was for insect/pest counts. One question farmers were asked was "how likely are you to adopt the use of consultants for doing insect/pest counts on your farm?" Nearly 21 percent of the farmers indicated they had already fully adopted the use of crop consultants and another 17 percent indicated

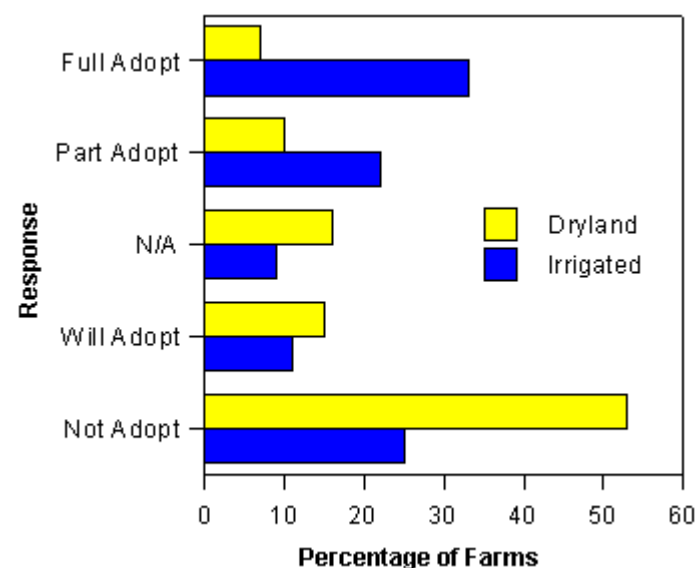
they were using crop consultants on at least part of their farm (*Figure 1*). Only 38 percent indicated they were unlikely to adopt the use of crop consultants at anytime during the next five years. The use of crop consultants is even more significant if considered in terms of crop acres because the larger farmers are more likely to use crop consultants. The 20 percent who had fully adopted the use of crop consultants farmed 27 percent of the crop acres. In contrast the 38 percent who indicated no plans to use consultants during the next five years farmed 32 percent of the acres.



While the statewide use of crop consultants provides helpful information, it is important to recognize that the use of crop consultants varies greatly by region of the state. The major reason for variation appears to be that irrigation farmers use more crop consultants than dryland farmers. In the west where agriculture is predominately dryland, over 61 percent of the farmers served by the Panhandle Research and Extension Center at Scottsbluff indicated they were unlikely to use crop consultants for any purpose during the next five years. In contrast, only 17 percent of the farmers located in the extensively irrigated counties served by the South Central Research and Extension Center at Clay Center said they were unlikely to use crop consultants in the next five years.

Major differences exist in the use of crop consultants for specific purposes. For example, only 7 percent of the dryland farmers said they had fully adopted the use of crop consultants for insect/pest advice but 33 percent of the irrigation farmers said they had fully adopted this practice (*Figure 2*). There are clear economic reasons for this difference. Since irrigation farmers have a more valuable crop in the field, they would suffer greater economic loss from uncontrolled pest infestations. In addition, irrigated operations require a great deal of labor during the irrigation season so irrigators may need to hire crop consultants for insect and pest counts. The dryland farmers are more likely to have time to do the pest counts themselves.

Figure 2. Irrigated vs Dryland Farms



Crop consultants are also hired to provide advice to farmers about the appropriate amount of nitrogen to apply. Farmers were asked, "how much emphasis do you place on crop consultant recommendations in deciding how much nitrogen to apply?" Farmers who indicated that crop consultant recommendations were very important or important operated 46 percent of the crop acres in Nebraska. Another 14 percent of the crop acres were farmed by producers who gave only slight consideration to crop consultants. In contrast, farmers who did not consider information from crop consultants in making their decision about the amount of nitrogen to apply operated 39 percent of the land.

Once again, there were significant differences between dryland and irrigation farmers in the value they

placed on information from crop consultants in deciding how much nitrogen to apply. Only 9 percent of the dryland farmers said crop consultant recommendations were very important to them for this decision, but 29 percent of the irrigation farmers indicated these recommendations were very important.

Many consultants were active in the area of irrigation management advice to farmers. Irrigation farmers were asked to "select the method which best describes how you decide when to irrigate the field". Of these farmers, 25 percent indicated that they used a crop consultant to decide when to irrigate.

Many factors influence the use of crop consultants by farmers. The type of crop grown, whether the crop is irrigated, the risk of crop damage, the debt load of the farmer, the size of the farming operation, the labor available, and the cost of the service all influence the decision by farmers to employ a consultant. Many farmers do their own scouting and do not need to hire the service. Often particular pest problems during a cropping season or the need for reassessment of the fertility levels in the soil may encourage farmers to buy the service. Consulting services may be provided as a package with the custom application of pesticide or fertilizer by commercial firms and cooperatives. In these cases the joint service of scouting and application may be sold to the farmer for one price.

The results of this survey indicate the importance of crop consultants to Nebraska agriculture. They provide services to a substantial number of farmers in the areas of pest control, fertilizer application and irrigation management. Their services are more often hired by irrigated farmers than dryland farmers, but both groups are planning to use more consultant services.

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N-4, Miscellaneous

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