Excuses, Excuses

(Yield Potentials Are Far Greater Than You Imagine)

by Wayne Smith

TECHNIQUE

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Wayne Smith has been a driving force in repealing the (self-imposed) limits of grain cropping, and now cattle production. His effectiveness at increasing productivity and profitability is well established in Western Australia, South Australia, South Africa, and farther abroad. Further information can be found at www.agronomy.com.au. (The units of measure in Australia are mostly metric nowadays, although Wayne has kindly reverted to imperial for the readership in the USA.)

The 'Yeah, but' Syndrome☺

How do you know that you are farming as good as you possibly can? Do you average 58-bu/a wheat crops on 10 inches of moisture (including what moisture is already in the soil at planting)?

Did you know that for most farmers, rainfall is *not* the main factor in determining your profit? It's true that more rain, especially if it is nicely distributed throughout the season, does help your profit enormously, but that is still not the biggest factor in determining your profit. One quick test to prove it: On your yield maps from data gathered at harvest, your wheat yields may range from 10 – 100 bu/a. Does rainfall account for that variation? Of course not. Similarly, there is usually at least twice the yield difference between the best and worst farmers in a locale, and again, rainfall does not explain the yield differences.

If you are like Australian farmers, we have budgeting consultants who keep on pushing the line of cutting costs to increase profits. They keep on hounding and hounding that you must not farm to a potential. Cost control is what counts!

Sounds fair enough. It is just a pity they have missed the point. Bear with me for a moment while I explain.☺

Have a look at the two photos on this page. There is only a fenceline between them. Both, of course, got the same rainfall.

The financial consultant for the guy on the left says, "Things are really tight. That dry start to the season really cost you (again) and you need to cut costs. There is just not enough margin to make a profit if you spend too much." Sounds fair enough, doesn't it? It was a terribly dry start to the season and more rain would have made a huge difference. Blind Freddie can see that. His wheat yield was around 5 bu/a.

But, have a look at the photo on the right. Same soil type, same rainfall. Different farmer. Yielded around 52 bu/a. Ten times the yield difference, and a sizeable profit instead of a big loss!

However, the 52-bushel crop was well below what it should have been—it was still zinc deficient. The potential yield was at least 67 – 70 bu/a. For your interest, Blind Freddie's crop was starving for sulphur (sulfur) and zinc. They were the two main reasons for the low yield.

Blind Freddie suffers from what I call the 'yeah, but' syndrome. You probably muttered a few "yeah, buts" when reading the above examples.☺ The excuses ('yeah, buts') hold you back from being as profitable as you should be. What you think is impossible actually *is* possible, and is probably being achieved by some farmers already.

Photos by Wayne Smith.

The sorry-looking wheat in the left-hand photo made 5 bu/a. Another bad year? The handsome wheat crop in the photo on the right made 52 bu/a. More rain? No, only a fenceline separated the two!

I'll give you another example. If you only had 7.5 inches of rain (starting from zero moisture in the soil), what wheat yield would you expect? What if your soil was also white beach sand that couldn't hold more than 1.5 inches of moisture in the top 3 feet of soil? With these constraints for 2,000 acres of wheat, a longtime no-till farmer in Western Australia averaged 45 bu/a. That was better than our potential yield calculations. We used to think that type of yield was impossible. Not anymore.

You should have heard the "yeah, buts" when people saw that farmer's crops, though. All sorts of excuses about it's cooler where he farms than on mine, it's milder in winter, the soil is deeper, or he can afford to use more fertiliser than I can. Excuses, excuses!

Photo by Wayne Smith.

Photo showing distinctive copper-deficiency symptoms in Kansas wheat. The uppermost fully expanded leaf on the left is 'tipped' with a twisting of the dead tissue, while the next leaf down (on the right) is green to the tip—this is telltale copper deficiency, and nothing else induces this particular pattern. (And, no, it's not freeze damage.)

What Is Possible?

Profit is king, but if you do not have an eye on what is truly possible, you will not achieve the profit that is waiting for you. For most readers, I believe you are nowhere near your potential profits because you do not know what is possible, nor why you are not achieving it. I use an excellent quote from T.S. Eliot in my thinking about agriculture: "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find how far one can go."

I don't know if you have a potential yield formula in the USA, but we do in Australia and it has been vital in prompting us toward increasing our yields and profitability.

Cattle Potentials

As with cropping, so too with livestock: You need to work out what the potential is to know how well you are going. Do not compare yourself to others in your area because everyone might be doing the same wrong things.☹

For example, in my area, my parents have a small (hobby) beef farm. It is very wet and boggy in winter, and dry in summer. Typical stocking rates for the district are 1 cow & calf per 4 to 5 acres. Rainfall is 27 – 31 inches per year, a very high-rainfall area by our standards.

My parents' farm, including the peat bogs, is about 24 acres in size. If we did what the district average was, we would only have 5 to 6 cows (plus their calves) on the property. Currently we have 30 mated cows, 6 mated heifers, 28 calves, and a bull, and *excess* forage, and, no, we don't feed them any grain, and hay is only used occasionally for roughage. I am aiming to have 40 cows and 40 calves by next year (2007), but the theoretical potential is more than 60 cows & 60 calves. Some might suspect this is overstocking and damaging the land, but, due to the methods used, it is having the contrary result of actually *improving* the pasture. (More on this in a moment.)

Photo by Wayne Smith.

Wayne's cows on ryegrass + kikuyu pasture. Rotational grazing and other good practices have allowed him to increase stocking and production ten-fold over the area average.