

..... **TO HEAR BRUCE WENDT DESCRIBE** his corn and soybean operation near Leigh, Neb., the Wendt farm is “pretty basic.” With just over 1,500 acres devoted to row crops—with about half of it under center-pivot irrigation—that may appear to be the case.

But basic or not, there’s rarely a dull moment on the Wendt farm. Like most farmers today, he’s faced with an ever-present set of challenges, from how to keep up with rapidly changing technology and volatile markets to pressures to be even more efficient with less, all the while remaining profitable. Sound familiar?

To keep up, he makes changes, plenty of them, but at his own pace. For instance, Wendt says of his approach, “I think it’s important to invest in technology when you can, but instead of trying to do it all at once, I like to get comfortable with it before I take the next step.”

Exacerbating the conundrum of doing more with less, Wendt doesn’t anticipate much labor assistance from family, except for his dad, LaVern, who works on the farm part-time. With three daughters, Wendt jokes, “Right now, my chance of getting any more help doesn’t look good.”

That’s all the more reasons for Wendt to become more efficient, reduce labor requirements, and diversify the market and workload. To do so, Wendt has put in place a few changes over the years that, while they may be “basic,” are also just plain smart and broadly applicable to other operations. Here are a few that he shared.

at a Time

This farmer approaches change at his own deliberate pace.

STORY BY THARRAN E. GAINES

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Hogs Fill the Gap

More and more, hogs are a rarity on the typical family farm. Yet, Wendt says they’ve been an asset to his bottom line in more ways than one. Wendt is actually a partner in two different operations. The first is a “nursery” facility that holds about 4,400 head of pigs that are fed on contract for about 8 weeks following weaning.

“The other barn is a 2,400-head, wean-to-finish barn,” he adds. “Those hogs are owned by me and the two guys who work with me ... and a lot of them, in fact, are purchased from the guy who owns the pigs in the other barn,” Wendt says, noting that it sounds more complicated than it really is.

“One of the benefits of having the hog operation is that it gives me two guys as back-up on field work or if I have to be gone for a weekend.”

“Without the hog operation, I’d have to find somebody willing to work part-time on the farm, or Dad and I would just have to try and handle it all by ourselves,” which Wendt says wouldn’t allow much room for error or time off.

Diversity in the Market

In addition to diversifying via the hog operation, which Wendt insists has had its “ups and downs,” Wendt has also spread his financial risks by expanding his grain markets. As an example, 160 to 200 acres of his soybean crop each year are dedicated to Vistive soybeans, which have a low linolenic acid content, making them ideal for the food-grade soybean oil market.

“On the corn, I forward contract some of it, while pretty much everything I store on the farm gets sold to ADM in Columbus for ethanol,” he says. “Depending on the price, I also use some of the crop in the hog operation. But that gets to be a game, too. By the time I haul my corn to the feed mill and have it mixed in a ration, it’s about as cheap to just buy the corn through them ... especially if I’ve got mine contracted at a better price.” >>