



# THE “ART” OF FARMING



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Spring seeding and fertility management is one of the variables in the equation.

## Farming is not an exact science

Every farmer has either used the phrase themselves or most certainly heard the expression. Farming may be the oldest profession on the planet next to hunting and gathering. Yet every year, we graduate more scientists, develop more prescription maps, and record more data to make better business decisions. The agronomist will tell you down to the pound how much fertilizer and in what ratio, at what timing and depth or delivery method to apply. The economist in you may alter your crop rotation or insurance coverage, perhaps even add another crop or consider renting or purchasing another tract of land. The logistics expert, the top dog in the operation, will ultimately weigh into every decision.

Agronomy is the study of elements of crop and soil science and applied scientific knowledge specific to crop production and soil management. Agricultural economics is the application of economic theory

in optimizing the production and distribution of food, fibre, feed, and fuel. Maximizing crop yield while maintaining soil health is also a stated goal. The field of ag economics also delves into food, environmental and agricultural policy.

My cousin Deano and I have long conversations while we are seeding, both running the drills. We ruminate over how we can do things better, squeeze extra bushels, save five minutes filling, improve logistics. We talk about buying fertilizer in the fall, spring vs. fall applied fertilizer, banded vs. broadcast with logistics, economics and agronomy, always struggling to find the right balance. We discuss land prices, interest rates, succession planning, soil health, carbon markets and of course the weather. What we have come to conclude is farming is an art, balancing agronomy, economics and logistics. The trump cards beyond our control are ag policy and Mother Nature.

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## Balancing the equation

When balancing agronomy, economics, and logistics, perhaps only two factors come into the equation. When purchasing land, can the operation afford the payments at current interest rates, and can the equipment fleet and employee roster (logistics) make cropping more land feasible? Rent vs. buy? What are interest rates doing, how does the machinery market look?

Many of the best agronomists will recommend deep banding nitrogen and sulphur at seeding and applying adequate phosphorous in the seed row. They may also suggest feeding more foliar nitrogen to the crop when actively growing throughout the year, a risk mitigation measure they inherently learn from their programs as ag economics is a requirement. The economics and logistics of what form of fertilizer, anhydrous, granular, or liquid, as well as the equipment requirements come into play. Finally, determining if all the fertilizer can be applied at seeding, while not stopping every 20 acres to fill, or if the fertilizer can be banded in the fall if harvest is completed in a timely manner. Maybe the phosphorous is placed in the seed row with the drill and the bulk of it spread or floated on to cover acres in a timely manner – you can see the struggle, the problem and finding the right balance. Solving the equation is an art as it is different for each operation. Every operation is different and not one manager can say “their” way is the right way, the exact science.

### The trump cards

Even when a farm business manager has balanced the equation, struggled finding the right balance between agronomy, economics and logistics, Mother Nature and agricultural policy still hold the trump cards. A whole season of work can be destroyed in a hailstorm in a matter of minutes. A long period of drought or flooding can decimate yields and erode crop insurance historical averages in a single season and leave multi-generational farms on the brink of bankruptcy. Agricultural policy coming out of Ottawa, such as the new capital gains tax changes, can wipe away a generation of hard work and leave the next generation with 1/3 less of their land base. Other trade policies enacted can have importing countries impose



*APG Past-Chair Robert Semeniuk and Grain Growers of Canada's Kinga Nolan having the hard conversations with MP Shannon Stubbs.*

punitive tariffs and lock out commodities all together.

Canada exported \$99.1 billion worth of agriculture and agri-food exports in 2023. In comparison, the Canadian automotive sector exported \$68 billion worth of vehicles in 2023, which includes imported parts that were assembled in Canada. Crude oil still tops the charts at \$139 billion and natural gas way behind at \$13 billion. One in eight jobs in Canada are related to agriculture and food. That's huge.

Despite agriculture and food being such a strong contributor to the Canadian economy, it seems the policy coming out of Ottawa is seldom in favour of defending our industry. As ag economist guest lecturer Neil Meyer from the University of Idaho proclaimed: “Ag policy is like pouring concrete. Once you have poured the forms, it takes a lot of hammering to change it.” Ag policy is the one trump card we can influence. It takes collective action and farmer voices, effective advocacy through a single voice,

and holding politicians accountable for the wrench they throw into the sustainability and succession of multi-generational farms. Your commissions and national ag associations are trying hard to be heard and, whenever possible, to seek common ground and speak with one voice.

Like farming, diplomacy is an art, not a science. Former US diplomat and government official Richard Armitage said: “Diplomacy is much more than talking to your friends... You've got to talk to people who aren't your friends, and even people you dislike.” But perhaps former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said it best: “Diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions.”

Until we can control the weather, and have favourable and intelligent national agricultural policy, farming will remain balancing the equation of agronomy, economics and logistics, and an art rather than a science.