

A Grower's Perspective on ISO

*by Ron Swanson, Galt, Iowa
Certified ISO Grain Producer and
Member, Innovative Growers*

I am Ron Swanson and my wife Florine and I farm in North Central Iowa in Wright County. We have a cash grain operation with a com soybean rotation. Our son Stuart farms with us and while we share a common line of machinery, he has his own management unit separate from ours. He has a small farrow to finish hog operation as well.

Why ISO Is For Me

It is a well established fact that Midwestern agriculture is competing on a global scale with Brazil and Argentina coming on strong. Their effort is not going to go away so, if I am to survive in the future, I need to differentiate myself from what they are doing. It appears that they are going to be a low cost, high volume producer of commodity grains. This competition is going to have an effect on our domestic markets for some time to come. ISO certification gives me an opportunity to offer the market, a product that meets special criteria preferred by the end-user that producers of commodity grains will not be able to achieve.

In theory, ISO certification should give me an opportunity to increase my gross profits without adding acres. In essence, I am expanding my information base rather than my production base. I am a member of Innovative Growers which is a farmer-owned specialty grain supply company. The leadership of this group strongly encourages its membership to become ISO certified as a means of promoting its advantage with the end-users, both foreign and domestic. Since I am secretary-treasurer of the group, I thought I had better get with the cause. About 1/3 to the Innovative Grower membership should be ISO certified by this summer.

I have always had an interest in farm records and the need for these records to be standardized. In the past, agriculture has felt it was special when it came to records and therefore did not need to conform to the rest of the business community. If we expect to participate in the global economy in the future, we are going to have to change this attitude. The ISO process helps us to achieve this goal.

Initial Impressions

With these ideas in mind, I signed up for Reggie Clause's Blue Light Special ISO training sessions. I guess I was a little naive in thinking the process couldn't be all that difficult.

Needless to say it took me quite a while to grasp the ISO concept and its application to agriculture. Even after beginning to understand what ISO is all about, it was another big step to try and bring my farm into compliance. There really isn't any template that can be used for all ag operations as each organization is unique. It took several tries to develop the quality manual with each revision a refinement of the previous. I remember thinking to myself on the way home from one of Reggie's particularly intense sessions, just why is it I want to do this.

The Developmental Process and Learning Curve

This is a process by which one should only take small bites at a time. Also, it is something that is the easiest to learn by actually doing it. It usually works best by doing some and then letting it set for a period of time and then coming back and reviewing what you did. Often you will see things differently or more clearly after the interval. Eventually after the series of small bites, the total project comes together. I suspect it will always be a works in progress, which probably is the theory behind the concept of ISO in the first place.

Implementation

I have completed the process through the first internal audit which was recently done by Ray Hansen. I am scheduled to go through the certification audit during the last part of June. If successful, the ISO program will be in place for the fall harvest. I will be able to test the system with the spring planting and summer field operations before the actual certification. This will allow for any flaws to be corrected before that time. It is going to take a certain amount of discipline to document all of the activity especially with a one man shop like mine. Farmers by nature are not paper people. However a paper trail is the heart of the ISO system. Like Reggie has often said, "If it isn't recorded it didn't happen." Success or failure will be contingent upon my attentiveness to this detail.

Developing an ISO system for my farm has pulled together a number of separate record programs I have been utilizing in my operation. These included financial, equipment maintenance, crop management database, farm service agency records, crop insurance records, field yield data, and inventory control. There has never been a lot of commonality between these different programs. Now each of these becomes an individual block that are patched together to become the ISO quilt to blanket the farm operation.

The ISO system allowed for an objective review of a contract opportunity for non-GMO soybeans for 2003. In this case process, it resulted in rejecting the contract. Our local cooperative is part of an alliance supporting the soybean processing plant and the contract would have been coordinated through their office. The plant is located further away from our normal delivery location and has a wider basis as well. Because of this, the extra cost of transportation would use a significant portion of the premium offered. In addition, the contract specifications called for a very tight tolerance of GMO soybeans that would be difficult to achieve. In consultation with Dr. Charles Hurburgh, it appeared that this tolerance probably could not be obtained by the protocol suggested by the contract. These reservations were expressed to the local cooperative personal in charge of the procurement.

The ISO system allows for a documented traceability from the purchase of the seed, planting in the field, crop monitoring during the growing season and harvest. This continues with the

delivery of the produced crop to the storage facility and ultimately the delivery to the end user. Once the product is delivered the end-user there is follow up communication on the customer satisfaction. There is communication with others involved with the operation as well such as landlords and farm managers.

Critical Review

I still struggle with the relativeness of it all. Is all of this work worthwhile and will there be a payback? At this point the marketplace has a lot of interest in the ISO process but they have not backed it up with their checkbook. Some Innovative Grower members have participated in trade missions to Japan and they report that when they convey to them that they are ISO certified their interest really picks up. It may take a number of years to generate the revenue needed to offset the costs associated with ISO.

There maybe other considerations for the adoption of ISO by farmers. Environmental and food safety issues are a couple that come to mind. ISO would work well in addressing these concerns. It is kind of like "do it before it is done to me."

For me personally at age 63, I doubt that I will fully benefit from the adoption of the ISO system. However, I as mentioned earlier that I have a son that farms with me and there may come a point is his career that he will need to utilize the process. From that standpoint I am willing to go through the effort needed to adopt the ISO system to agriculture. I have been able to take advantage of agriculture programs my ancestors put in place before me without any direct benefit to them. They just knew it needed to be done for the future good of the sector.

Conclusions

As you have heard today there are a number of Quality Management Systems being adopted for production agriculture. What may end up happening is that there will develop a tiered quality system for agriculture with ISO probably at the top of the pyramid and two or three layers of quality assurance underneath with varying degrees of sophistication. Hopefully, there will some standardization of criteria between the different systems for the ease of transfer of information.

It is kind of like the adoption of the 3-point hitch by the machinery equipment industry. We currently can couple different brands of tractors to many different kinds of implements with the use of a common hitch. This allows for a multitude of personal preferences and needs to be satisfied.

We will need this kind of standardization in agricultural quality management systems if we desire the same degree of flexibility. Hopefully, it won't be the Bill Gates definition where the strongest becomes the standard.

I would like to thank the ISU Extension Service for its help and support in this process. I certainly appreciate the all of the effort they have put forth and it would not have happened without it.

Thank you.