

“Thirty Five Crops”

The United Nations projects that 2.5 billion more people are expected to join the global population by 2050. By my math, that's 35 years away, which may seem like a long time but consider this; 2.5 billion people is an enormous increase and those folks will likely want to eat. Since most crops are planted, grown, and harvested within one year, that means we only have 35 crops to feed a lot more people than we are feeding now.

That's 35 calving seasons to produce more beef, 35 more harvests to gather more corn and beans, 35 more... well you get the idea. Feeding that many more people will require a 60% to 70% increase in food production during those 35 growing seasons. How can our farmers produce that much more food when more and more good farmland seems to be getting lost to development? Here are a few ideas on what it will take to make it happen.

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Increase yield. While it may seem obvious, if we need more food on the same amount or even less acreage of land, the primary way to do that is to increase the yield per acre. We produce about the same amount of corn for example in Smith County that we did 100 years ago, but on a lot less land since yields have gone from about 25 bushels per acre to around 160 bushels per acre. No matter if it's crops or livestock, we have to continue to get more out of our acreage.

Increase adoption of precision agriculture and other technology. Whether it's soil mapping to find the most productive spots in a field, using more efficient irrigation, or fertilizing more effectively with GPS, modern farmers have learned to utilize technology to increase their efficiency. With increased cropping intensity being necessary to produce more food, technology will continue to evolve. Drones pop into my mind as a fairly new technology that may help us going forward, as well as better seed varieties and new pest control methods.

Preserve the soil and water quality. Some environmentalists seem to think they came up with the great idea of trying to help the environment, and that it is their duty to protect the land from farmers. The truth is that most farmers realize their livelihood comes from the soil and water around them and they will fight to take care of the land they've been blessed with. For instance, automatic swath control virtually eliminates overlaps of fertilizer and overspray of chemicals which is a win/win for the farmer and the environment. To produce more food, we have to continue to protect our resources.

Encourage youth to enter agriculture. We hear a lot about the average age of farmers getting older, and that's true but the question is, why? Is it because young people don't want to work or have no interest in farming? I know several 4-H and FFA members who would dispute that and so would I. Agriculture is an expensive proposition as land and equipment doesn't come cheap. If we're going to produce more food, we need more young people who are able to take over for the older generation. Educating them and providing resources to get started should continue to be a priority.

Educate our consumers. Consumers have an increasing interest in knowing how their food is produced and processed. While producers might not view education as their job, we would do well to remember that if we're not teaching folks about food production, someone else is. That someone could be from a group with an activist, anti-agriculture mindset. Most folks, if properly educated, are intelligent enough to understand the need of common practices such as implanting calves, spraying for weeds, applying fertilizer, etc.

We certainly have a lot to do over the next 35 years in agriculture, but the good news is we've done it before. The expected growth over the next four decades is actually much slower than the one seen in the past four decades during which the population grew by 3.3 billion people. We know we don't farm today exactly like we did 35 years ago and the same will be true in 2050, but with the right mix of education, innovation, and hard work, our farmers will continue to feed the world for many years to come.