

Commentary

Isolated - but not alone

by Hugh Maynard

The geographic isolation of farmers has been, in some instances, an impediment to development. Distance has presented numerous problems, ranging from market access to the simple exercise of taking a few days off. In this context, communications have always been an important part of the agricultural sector, a fact reflected by the large number of farm publications that have existed in proportion to the farming population. And the need for information by farmers continues to grow rather than diminish, while at the same time the costs of delivering that information by print also continues to increase; postal rates, for example, have risen by as much as 500% for some publications in the last four years.

All this points to the "information highway" as an alternative method of information delivery, but this too is going to be problematic for many farmers for some years to come. Long distance charges, even though less than regular telephone rates, will make "electronic surfing" comparatively expensive and subject to disproportionate costs as services are to be increasingly billed on a user-pay basis. With high deficits, there will be little government capital available to install the newer technologies. Commonly accessible in urban centres, the lower population densities of the rural areas offer little prospect of pay-back to commercial investors. Some farmers, stuck with party-line equipment for some years to come before scheduled replacement, cannot yet use a fax machine or modem from their farms.

Enter instead video programs, transmitted via satellite. Televisions, VCRs and satellite dishes are much more common technologies in rural areas than are computers and Internet accounts. While the most frequent uses are to watch Hockey Night in Canada and the Movie of the Week, the U.S. land grant universities are already leading the charge with the creation of a network of video production facilities and uplink sites. Called the AgSat Network, it owns a share of a satellite which is used to beam information, training and certification programs across North America. Interested in a 12-part short course on cow-calf production? Check into the University of Oregon's bimonthly transmissions. Looking for an update on market trends and economic data?

The University of Iowa puts one on the air on a weekly basis. For those looking for the right day to take advantage of market swings, commercial broadcasting provides up to the minute developments.

While the satellite delivery systems will continue to grow in their ability to deliver information, the real beauty of the system will be the availability of "minority" programming over a wide-distribution area. The chances of a raspberry producer in Cape Breton being able to access regular and in-depth information on that particular production is severely limited. An information day put on by one institution where raspberry production numbers warrant such an enterprise, can be accessed by a limitless number of producers in an infinite number of locations. Specialty information, such as marketing tips for organic producers, or new strategies for those interested in sustainable agriculture, can be widely distributed and accessed by any organization or individual with the appropriate receiving technology.

The U. S. AgSat Network charges a flat license fee per program, which usually includes proceeds and the right to use a video copy for educational purposes. Commercial programs are similar to cable television in that a subscription to the channel has to be purchased. Missed the transmission? The local library or school can be set up as an agricultural video distribution point, the University of Nebraska has even established a distribution network for its programs in conjunction with a video store franchise. On Friday nights, it's "The Lion King" for the kids, "Forage Production 101" for Mom and Dad.

The information Superhighway will eventually set up a service road in rural areas. In the meantime, satellites will provide more information than the average farmer will have time to handle, and might even beat the telephone companies to the Internet; independent operators are already experimenting with Internet server points connected via satellite - flat fee access without long-distance charges. Farmers may continue to be geographically isolated, but will never be alone.