



# Rademacher Farms Newsletter

Newsletter 2 - Change Is Hard

Mar 31, 2019

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## Why Are So Few Doing This??

I was asked this in response to our first newsletter. If there are really benefits to this way of farming, why are so few doing it? Totally valid question. This newsletter is more of a general explanation of why change is hard in agriculture, not specifically why sustainable agriculture is not more common locally. I will say though, that there are people all over the world making changes just like us! Finally, I'll finish up this newsletter with a quick summary of our worm study results.

## Traditions and Social Pressure

The, "it's always what we've done" attitude is very strong in agriculture. There's also an unspoken range of acceptable behavior. While I am not discounting the role of traditions, agriculture is a science based career. Because of this, it requires near constant analysis of everything in the operation, and no tradition is safe if there is reasonable evidence against it.

There is also intense social pressure. "Coffee shop talk" is a very real thing, and is generally as accurate and helpful as the game "Telephone." Like when local rumors started that we were going organic. If you are heavily invested in what others think of you, going against the grain in agriculture is not the thing to do. For example, when one person starts spring tillage or begins planting, it causes a massive chain reaction of people following suit, many times even when soil conditions are not even right yet. Crazy.

This attitude is incredibly unfortunate because it stifles innovation. For example: We will potentially be able to skip one of the herbicide applications in our corn crop due to no-till, cover crop, and crop rotation. In future seasons, we are also on track to skip at least one herbicide application in soybeans as well. Wheat currently gets no herbicide. Think of the cost, time, energy, and water savings that represents, none of which would be possible if we were swayed by public opinion and traditions.

The U of I is estimating that average farm profit will very likely be negative next year.<sup>1</sup> Also, farm bankruptcies have been trending up the last few years.<sup>2</sup> For goodness sake, it's time to try doing things a little different!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2019/01/grain-farm-income-outlook-for-2019-negative-incomes-ahead.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/this-one-here-is-gonna-kick-my-buttfarm-belt-bankruptcies-are-soaring-11549468759>

## Misinformation

“Product X will increase your yield 3 bushels!!” How was the study done and who paid for it? Every seed company has an ad claiming they are 3-5 bushels better than each other. One thing that is seriously lacking in Agriculture is the ability to evaluate and criticize data. And I think it’s unfortunate that so few kids go to college and end up back at the farm, because experience analyzing data is sorely needed.

The F.I.R.S.T hybrid trials are touted as a great, independant way to select which hybrid to plant for the season. In these trials, all the best hybrids from every company are pitted against each other to find the winner in regional trials! How sexy! But... dig deeper and you find that each featured hybrid is represented by a sample 2 corn rows wide and 45’ long.

### MATH TIME!

That means that each hybrid is represented by a whopping ~186 corn plants or ~.005 acres. For reference, 1 acre of corn has about 36,000 plants. So if a hybrid “yields” 250 bushels/acre in the trial, it actually meant they harvested 1.25 bushels and multiplied it by 200 to find the yield per acre since only .005 acres was harvested. A bird eats 2 corn seeds? Sorry Charlie, 1% of your plants are gone.

People are making decisions on this kind of crap data. No-till vs conventional tillage, fertilizer rates, fungicide/insecticide use, all have trials that are no better than this one. Pretty graphs sell a lot of stuff.

## IT’S ALL ABOUT THE BUSHELS, BABY!

Maybe one day I’ll wrap my head around the obsession with bushels. Is it just the bragging rights?? We are producing about 5-10% less grain (depending on the crop) and are proud of it, because profit is up higher than if we were farming any other way. We chase profit, not yield. Based on 2018 county average yields and some cost assumptions, we are easily out profiting the average farm. We are using less fertilizer and chemicals than ever, and best of all, gaining soil, not losing it. We are also working on specialty markets to be able to sell our grain for even better prices. Now there’s some things to brag about!



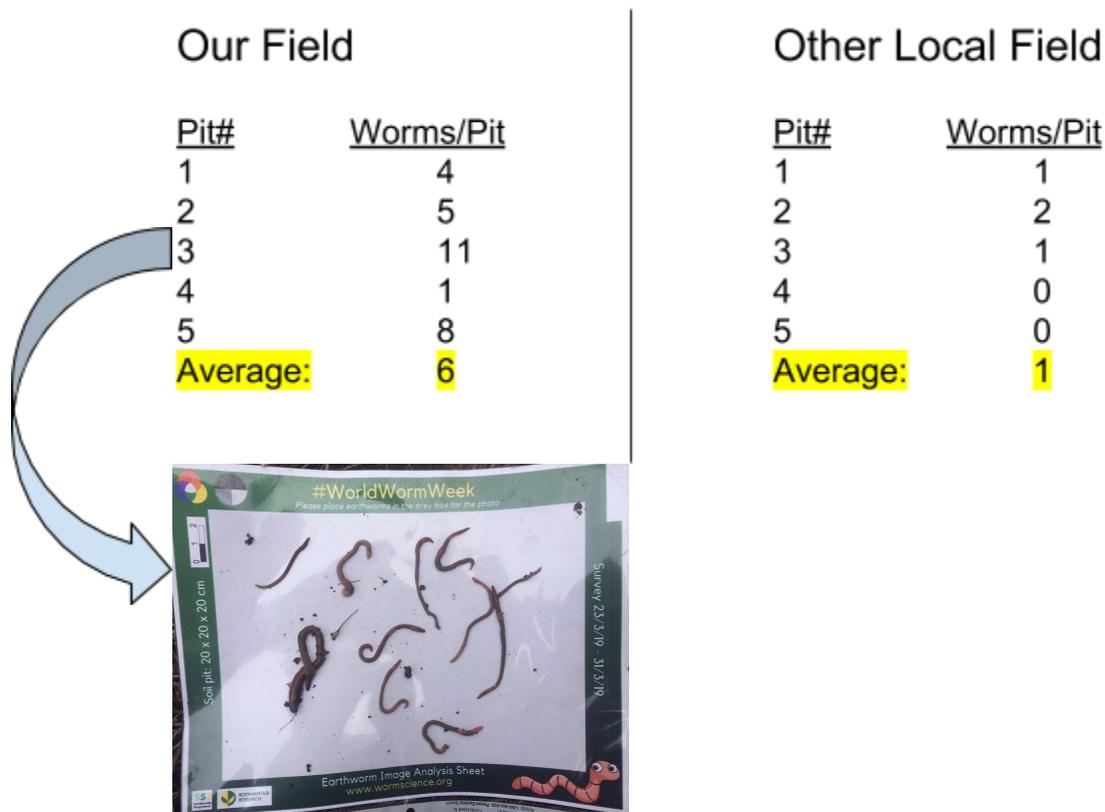
## Know Your Market

Lastly, I think this is a huge stumbling block. Farms have become great at mass production and generally deal with a few local grain elevators. Most grain then goes to animal feed or biofuels. Despite this, the consumer is still our market, not the elevator. We need to think beyond the local elevator and foresee some of the market changes that are coming. Almost all of the grain from elevators will end up with ADM, Cargill, and Bunge to name a few. All of those massive companies are

now setting sustainably sourced grain goals, which will trickle down to local elevators, sooner rather than later.

# WORLD WORM WEEK

Switching gears a bit. We participated in an international study put on by Rothamsted Research in the UK, one of the oldest agricultural research stations in the world. They commissioned a farm-led study to count worms under different conditions. Basically we dig a 8x8x8” hole, count, and identify worm types. I did this in one of our long term cover crop/no-till fields and compared it with local conventional fields. I dug 5 pits in each field...following is what I found:



That'll finish this newsletter up. Next one should be in a few weeks, hopefully with some actual farming updates if it ever stops raining! I'll also elaborate a little bit on the worm study and how cool worms are.

Frank