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Sifting Through Research

If the end of the year has you making cropping system decisions for next year, evaluating research conducted this past summer – or even summer's past – could be part of the process. Each season, a ton of great information comes from lots of sources, including company field plots, University research trials, and maybe even your own strip plots. All of them have value, so long as you understand what the data you're looking at is really telling you.

Take your own side by side comparisons for example. They include products or practices *you* want to see and are conducted on *your* farms under *your* management. The results are therefore of value to *your* decision-making process, even as they may not always include multiple strips to see how replicable the data might be.

On the other end of the spectrum might be University research trials. Admittedly smaller in size, they gain power (and statistical significance) from their design. Treatments are typically replicated multiple times in random orders, providing multiple observations while removing as much bias from external factors as possible. In some cases, they may even be replicated across multiple sites/states/geographies. When all that data is compiled together, it provides the opportunity for statistical analysis and a way to provide even more confidence that what the data finds is legitimate and will be replicated similarly on your farm as well.

In between are lots of other research methods: large or field scale comparisons, smaller two or three replicated strip trials, yield monitor comparisons, etc... Even without statistical analysis, they can provide a first-hand view of a practice to see if additional research is needed – or confirmation that replicated research trials will perform similarly on your own farm.

Take soil fertility research as an example. A single side by side comparison may not provide the same level of confidence one repeated multiple times might. Add multiple sites and multiple treatments conducted under the same management, and you can start to build response curves allowing us to provide some level of prediction of how a practice will work. We can then test those predictions on larger plots and further fine tune the data to our own farms.

A regular evaluation of management practices is seldom a bad thing and can be a great way to affirm what you are already doing or point you in an even better direction. As you evaluated, make sure to double check how data was collected and the value it can have when it can be replicated in some manner. No decision can be made with 100 percent confidence, but good data can get us a lot closer, and that's a good thing when it comes to making some of the large management decisions we may be facing.