working Smarter, Not Harder

More farmers and ranchers are using mobile technology to save time and money.

For three years, Steve Raulston of Clarksville, Texas, borrowed his wife's tablet computer and smartphone while on the road. He was amazed that the mobile devices allowed him to use e-mail and conduct business while traveling between his farming, ranching, drilling and logging operations throughout northeast Texas. Finally, last year, he bought his own.

"I fought the technology age as long as I could," he admits. "But with businesses as scattered as ours, it helps to communicate with e-mail throughout the day."

About 500 miles west, Scott Nolen of Seminole, Texas, doesn't leave home without his iPhone and iPad tablet computer. He quickly embraced mobile technology that puts information at his fingertips, allowing him to do more work in less time.

Today, it would be tough to pry Internet-connected devices away from these two Farm Credit customers and thousands of other farmers and ranchers — at least until the next technology comes along.

Agricultural economist Jay Yates would agree. He has seen firsthand how mobile devices are sweeping the agricultural community. He and colleagues with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service conducted 15 iPad/iPhone workshops for 150 farmers and ranchers between January 2012 and this past spring.

"When we held the first workshop, only one person brought his own iPad," Yates reported in April. "Fifteen months later, about 90 percent bring some device — mostly iPads."

Attendance was low in some places, but in other locations the classes were packed. "We had the most participation in areas with high-speed 3G and 4G cell coverage where the tools actually work," Yates says. In Texas farm country, the best connections he's seen are near the Gulf Coast.

According to Yates, use of the tools has little to do with age. Crop producers focus on tracking pesticides, while livestock producers are interested in mobile record keeping. The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association sponsored one of the workshops. Because of its success, more commodity-specific workshops will be offered this winter.

Yates, who farms in his spare time, appreciates how the devices help in getting equipment repaired. With their cameras, you can snap a photo and e-mail it to your equipment dealer to find out if parts are in stock.

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard farmers say their smartphone or iPad saved them a trip to John Deere," Yates says. "That's the biggest efficiency gain — saving downtime and keeping equipment and people working."

For information on iPad workshops for farmers and ranchers:
• In Texas, visit AgriLife.org/SouthPlainsProfit.
• In other states, contact your county Extension agent.
Scott Nolen
Running the Farm Remotely

Scott Nolen is a busy farmer. He produces cotton, peanuts, grain and cattle in West Texas, and operates a farm in eastern New Mexico, as well. He also serves on the AgTexas Farm Credit Board of Directors.

Nevertheless, life has become a little easier for Nolen in recent years. He credits his iPhone and an iPad tablet computer with saving him time and money.

When he irrigates, for example, he uses the larger-screen tablet to start up or move some of his 11 pivots. Newer pivots send him text messages when they’ve stop rotating. And he checks water pressure up to 35 miles away in New Mexico using his iPad.

“We have a lot of ground to cover,” Nolen says. “The iPad saves a lot of driving around.”

He also downloads weather information and follows markets on his broker’s website. Using an application or “app” called FarmPAD, he records when and where he’s plowed and applied chemicals, and he researches chemical labels with the Chemical Data Management Systems website, CDMS.com. The Nolen family purchased a pecan farm last year, and he uses his iPad to learn about this new business line.

“Things are changing fast,” Nolen says. “I enjoy more downtime today because of these devices.”

Until recently, AgTexas mailed large binders full of information to association directors to help them prepare for meetings. Today, the directors receive information electronically and read it on their iPads. “It saves me carrying around those big board books,” Nolen says. “It’s convenient, because my iPad is always with me.”

In addition, the mobile devices put information at his fingertips, allowing him to make smarter decisions. He uses his tablet to scan social media sites and to learn what’s new in agriculture.

“AgTexas will post something on Facebook, and I’ll chase down more information on it,” Nolen says. 

Steve Raulston
Saving on Fuel, Labor, and Wear and Tear

Three years ago, Steve Raulston was just learning about apps — small specialized applications or programs for mobile devices.

Today, he uses several apps on his iPhone and iPad, and even has a favorite — GeoMeasure.

He uses GeoMeasure in his timber business, Raulston and Sons Logging, to plot out logging roads and estimate how much timber he can harvest from an area. “GeoMeasure speeds everything up and saves fuel and labor,” Raulston says. “It’s saved me thousands of dollars in wear and tear on machinery.”

On his farm, he uses GeoMeasure to estimate field sizes so he can purchase the right amount of fertilizer and weed-control products. He downloads Google Earth aerial photos of his land, and touches points on the screen to identify parcel corners. Then, GeoMeasure feeds back GPS coordinates and acreage.

Other favorite apps include Beef Market Central for grain and cattle prices, and the Weather Channel. He shoots photos of properties with his iPhone and e-mails them to staff and clients.

“These products make my day-to-day operation easier,” Raulston says. While some apps cost a few dollars, he’s amazed at how many are free.

Raulston has learned about new technology from his family. “The only class I took was from my wife, my sons and my four grandchildren,” Raulston says. “You’d be surprised what my 13-year-old granddaughter Madiyn teaches me!”

A Farm Credit customer since he was in his twenties, Raulston says he appreciates Lone Star Ag Credit’s competitive interest rates and ability to make both large and small loans. “I use Lone Star because of the friendly people — they understand the business I’m in,” he adds.

Raulston’s lender has embraced mobile technology, too. His loan officer, Lone Star Regional President James Welch, follows the markets, measures acreage and checks loan amortization tables on the road using an iPad, and Lone Star directors use iPads to access the latest board information. The association recovered the up-front cost of the tablets within a year by saving on binders, paper, copying and shipping.