

What if they gave the microphone to the elephant in the room?

By Kris Ehler, CCA

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It goes without argument that 2019 has been one of the most challenging years in agriculture. This goes for all parties involved, growers and retailers. We both have had our own and overlapping issues. One issue I continue to see unaddressed in a “head on attitude” is the amount of dicamba damage in the countryside.

Let me be the one who hands the microphone to the elephant in the room. As an independent retailer, we offer our customers access to all soybean trait platforms. Liberty Link, GT27, Non GMO, Xtend & Enlist E3. We are one of the few plots in the state of Illinois with multiple years of data comparing the available platforms in an unbiased side by side plot. Customers can then make a decision based off performance and how each platform would fit their respective operation. What does the yield data show? No clear advantage to any one platform over the other. Within each platform, there are stand out varieties. For example in 2018 we had growers planting a 3.6 Liberty soybean with 90 bushel field averages and growers planting a 3.6 Xtend soybean with 90 bushel field averages. Growers have done a much better job in the last 3-5 years placing soybeans on the right acre just as they would their corn hybrid placement. This has helped soybean performance and reduced some of the wide variations in yield we saw in previous years.

Let's start with the additional training that was required going into 2019. Was that necessary? I highly doubt it made a pinch of difference in reducing off target damage. I would assume that 90+% of the operators and retailers are doing things by the label and a portion of the off target damage was accidental contamination, leaving a small portion to actual misapplication. I would speculate due to the challenges that 2019 presented that there may be a few more contamination issues and misapplications because of applications being made in a tight window and cutoff date.

Then there's the extended cutoff date of July 15. The initial cutoff date of June 30 recognized that as the warmer, more humid weather crossed paths with a dicamba application, that volatility became a greater issue. I am not a meteorologist, but extending the date to July 15 completely undermines any additional education for operators and now potentially puts applications into an even more volatile window. 10 of the first 15 days of July 2019 had highs above 90 degrees. It was a race for retailers to make these dicamba applications within the extended deadline window. Canopy cover was minimal for many soybean fields that had only been planted for 3 or 4 weeks. There was little or no rain during that stretch to help settle what was in the atmosphere and now we see the repercussions. Dicamba movement upwards of ½ mile. That's 2640 feet. Well past the EPA's 57' omni directional buffer required in counties with endangered species or the 110' buffer to a sensitive crop.

So where do we go as an industry from here? Tempers have flared, lines drawn in the sand, scientific research ignored and neighborly relations broken. Retailers are exhausted. Growers with affected crops are tired of lip service. I have heard of some growers becoming so exhausted of fighting off target movement of dicamba that they “will just plant Xtend to protect themselves”. Let me be clear, **this is the last thing a grower should do!** We all have choices and those choices are all great options for certain scenarios. Let me remind agriculture that our industry is on the ropes right now with the Roundup law suit. You should all be scared. If one of the safest pesticides in our portfolio is that vulnerable to litigation and clear disregard to scientific facts, then the door of Pandora’s box is open. Now let’s increase the amount of dicamba applied in 2020 with similar weather patterns as 2019. You will see sensitive urban vegetation show symptomology, air monitoring systems show disturbing movement and our consumer base question why **WE** as agriculture didn’t address this issue. Doing nothing could adversely affect the way we farm and apply pesticides from here out.

We are at a very pivotal impasse with dicamba right now. Let’s get it right. Let’s not ignore the scientific research that has been conducted by independent university studies. Let’s not lose a vital tool in our tool box against resistant weeds. Let’s mend the broken relationships between neighbors, retailers and ag-chemical suppliers. Dicamba is a great burndown option. The weather doesn’t favor the extreme volatility that we saw this year with July applications. Let’s set realistic cut off dates and stick to them. Let’s respect our neighbor’s choices of platforms. There is space in agriculture for everyone’s choice and a fit for every platform.