

The *farmdoc* Story

The use of the Internet to develop information systems for agriculture was still relatively uncharted territory when agricultural economists at the University of Illinois began work on the *farmdoc* project in 1998. With initial funding from the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research, the project began as an early effort to create a comprehensive information system for farm decision-making under risk.



farmdoc version 1.1

The first project website, called *I-GRO* (Illinois Grain Risk Outreach), was launched in January 1999 and focused on marketing and outlook information, evaluation of market advisory services, and financial management. This initial experience led to two important insights. First, the Internet offered an unprecedented opportunity to provide agricultural decision-makers with round-the-clock access to integrated economic information and analysis. Second, agricultural economists were not particularly adept at designing websites and that professional design help was needed for the task they now had in mind.

Almost a year of planning went into the development of the new website, christened *farm.doc* (Farm Decision Outreach Central). Subject matter coverage was expanded to include agricultural finance, law and taxation, farm management, marketing and outlook, and agricultural policy, as well as specific issues such as crop insurance and the performance of agricultural market advisory services. Under the able direction of a local web designer each section of the new website was designed with the same "look-and-feel" and navigation tools, so that users could quickly find and apply available the information available. A broad portfolio of publications was made available to site visitors, including weekly outlook reports, bi-weekly farm management newsletters, and quarterly policy digests. A suite of decision tools and agricultural databases could also be found at the website.



farmdoc version 2.0

The new *farm.doc* website, launched in February 2000, was an immediate hit. Usage of the site more than doubled within a year. Numerous farm media articles featured in the site. For example, the spring 2001 issue of *agriculture.com* magazine named the *farm.doc* website one of the "Top Ten" land-grant sites and noted that, "This University of Illinois site, one of the best-designed and organized ag sites of any kind, is as useful as it is handsome." Later that same year *Top Producer* magazine named the *farm.doc* website one of the "Top Five" farm management information sites on the Internet. In 2002, the project received the prestigious Distinguished Extension Program Award from the American Agricultural Economics Association.



farmdoc version 3.0

With an eye towards making the *farm.doc* site even more user-friendly, another major transformation was undertaken in 2003. A new color scheme was incorporated to enhance readability and the homepage was re-designed to feature current “headlines,” commodity prices, and live weather radar images. A feature was also added that enabled visitors to the site to search both the website and the Internet from the homepage. Finally, the name of the project was shortened to *farmdoc* (all one word).



farmgate blog

In December 2005 *farmdoc* celebrated the launch of a sister site, *farm gate*, the first public-sector blog for farmers and agribusinesses in the U.S. Corn Belt. The *farm gate* blog was specifically designed to address the management needs of farmers across the spectrum of agricultural disciplines, including agricultural economics, crop and animal sciences, agricultural engineering, and veterinary medicine. The blogger searches the Internet to find the most valid, timely and relevant agricultural information available from land-grant universities, governmental agricultural agencies and other information sources. This information is then synthesized and summarized in blog posts, and users can submit feedback that provides additional perspectives. The launch of the blog received world-wide press coverage in national and international newspapers and websites.



Illinois Farm Economics Summit meeting

While the *farmdoc* project uses a “web-first” program model, traditional face-to-face meetings continue to play an important role. Regional “Illinois Farm Economic Summit” meetings are just one example. These meetings have been held at various locations in Illinois each December for the last decade and have been attended by over 4,000 producers, farm managers, lenders and other agricultural professionals. Dozens of FAST Tools training workshops have also been offered over the years not only in Illinois but throughout the U.S. All meetings are explicitly designed to reinforce material on the *farmdoc* and *farm gate* websites and direct attendees back to the websites.

A key factor in the overall success of the *farmdoc* project is the use of a team approach for organization and management. Members of the team are drawn from faculty and staff in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics at the University of Illinois. Team members have responsibility for all editorial and content decisions. In addition, each faculty or staff member on the team is responsible for developing applied research, educational information, and decision tools in specific subject matter areas. A team leader from this group provides overall leadership to the *farmdoc* project. Another key component of the team is the project manager, a full-time academic professional employed to manage the day-to-day

operations of the project. An advisory committee composed of farmers, farm managers, lenders, educators and other agricultural professionals provides valuable feedback on project activities.

Since its inception over a decade ago the *farmdoc* project has consistently delivered unbiased and timely economic information to agricultural producers and businesses . The *farmdoc* website sets the standard for round-the-clock access to seamless and integrated information and analysis. And statistics show that *farmdoc* users agree . In 2008 alone, the *farmdoc* website received more than 5.4 million hits and had more than 1 million visitors. There is no doubt that agricultural producers and managers will continue to need sound answers to tough economic questions in the future. The goal of the *farmdoc* project is to be at the forefront of harnessing the power of the Internet to bring those answers right to their desktop.