IMPROVING AN AGRONOMIST’S EFFICIENCY AND TRANSPARENCY

"Agworld is the information tool that agronomists can use to enhance 2-way communication with growers."

Ruaan Du Plessis
IK Caldwell, Shepparton, VIC

CHALLENGE
In his work as an agronomist, Ruaan Du Plessis realised that higher crop monitoring requirements combined with larger orchard sizes and an increased need for information by growers necessitated a new approach to data accessibility and transparency.

SOLUTION
Ruaan, together with his fellow IK Caldwell agronomists, decided to utilise Agworld as a platform to deliver their agronomy services both in the field and in the office.

RESULT
Agworld allows Ruaan to easily provide his clients with all critical information they require, whilst also letting Ruaan oversee more hectares as a consulting agronomist without losing oversight or control. Ruaan can offer more value and strengthen his relationships because of the detailed information he can offer his clients.
Detailed crop monitoring key for stone fruit exports

Agriculture plays a big role in the northern Victorian Goulburn Valley and the availability of irrigation water has made it one of Australia’s most productive and intensely farmed areas. Dairying and fruit growing are the predominant sectors in the Goulburn Valley and the surrounding towns are bustling with a range of businesses that support these farmers. Local agronomy organisations like IK Caldwell, for example, have tailored their offerings for orchardists to include the specialist technical services needed to grow quality fruit that can command a premium in the international fresh fruit trade. Where traditional agronomists just offered agronomy services, growers nowadays expect a full service offering that includes fruit fly traps, moisture probes and detailed reports needed for export certification amongst other services.

Recent free trade agreements such as the one between Australia and China (ChAFTA) have changed the focus for fruit growers from traditional channels like canneries and other domestic buyers to fresh fruit exports. Shepparton based IK Caldwell agronomist Ruaan Du Plessis explains: "Fresh fruit exports have been important for a number of years, but the tariff reductions agreed to in the 2016 ChAFTA is really making Australian orchardists a lot more competitive in this key overseas market. We produce a lot of stone and pome fruit around Shepparton and an increasing share of this production is destined for export to China but also Thailand and Taiwan."

Stringent bio-security compliance laws for export to Asia mean that growers need to have their orchards monitored for a number of quarantine pests by a person approved by the Department of Agriculture. Ruaan: "Growers have to register specific blocks of their orchard for export and thus for monitoring. We have a tolerance list for each pest and check each block at set intervals to make sure we stay below the given tolerance level. As exports become more important, the monitoring program is becoming bigger and more rigid; which is why we require the best recording and reporting tool available for our agronomy activities. For the monitoring program we need to show our findings, what caused them and which action we took: Agworld offers us exactly that. I can view all scouting reports and create recommendations from anywhere, which really helps me ensure that growers take timely action, so we don’t exceed the tolerance level for a certain pest."

Remaining relevant in a changing landscape

Ruaan Du Plessis has seen quite a few things change in his time as an agronomist, from starting with DuPont in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa in 1997. Ruaan has been involved in a range of vegetable and summer crops through roles involving agronomy, crop nutrition and related fertiliser products in both South Africa and Australia. Ruaan: “Up to 2012 I used a program made by Muddy Boots but, when I wanted to increase my transparency to
growers and be more efficient in servicing larger areas, I switched to Agworld to make this feasible for me. The way I see it, tools like Agworld are all about remaining relevant to a grower. Agworld lets me plan for my growers with as much or as little detail as they want; I can add any level of detail in regard to costing, inputs etc., depending on the grower’s needs. Growers increasingly need more information and Agworld is for me the platform to communicate this critical information to my clients.”

IK Caldwell has implemented Agworld with all agronomists across their 8 branches and is using Agworld as relationship building and communication tool. Ruaan: “Agworld is the main tool that we use to enhance 2-way communication between ourselves and growers. When I create a recommendation for example, I can immediately send it to both the grower, our merchandise manager and a contractor if needed. This means that as soon as I complete a recommendation, the grower knows what they need to do, our merchandise manager knows which products they have to get delivered where, and the contractor knows where and when they need to do a job for a grower. Everyone has the exact specs of the jobs and this really eliminates the opportunity for inaccuracies to be introduced through the chain of communication.”

Future-proofing agronomy practices

Agriculture is digitising rapidly, and agronomy is one area that is certainly not getting left behind. Ruaan elaborates: “An agronomist providing his or her clients with bits of paper that have recommendations scribbled on them is really not acceptable anymore. Growers rightfully demand a complete overview of all their agronomic data, all in the same spot, and they want to ensure that this data is there forever, so they can utilise it whenever they need to in future. A lot of my clients supply fruit to the major retailers as well as to export markets; they need to show exactly what they have applied to certain parts of the orchard and why, Agworld is the tool that can provide this kind of information.”
Ruaan continues: “As an industry, especially when it comes to exports, we have to be squeaky clean and make sure we do the right thing and document every step along the way. This is why visibility, traceability and accessibility of information are so important and this is also why Agworld is so important for me with all my daily tasks. Having all information available in the same spot helps us prevent MRL breaches and also provides growers with digital backup of everything that happened during the season, in case it’s needed for insurance claims or legal proceedings for example.”

Summing up his use of Agworld as Agronomist, Ruaan concludes with: “In short, Agworld is a great and flexible tool that is easy to use which, through the use of templates, is easy to scale up when consulting for a large number of growers with a range of demands and practices. For both myself and the growers, to have a map and a way of visually interpreting how much a crop costs you up to a given point in the season, gives you a better handle on what is happening. Everyone knows that data is becoming essential; but unless you have a platform like Agworld that allows you to collaborate with other stakeholders, structures your data and lets you create the reports you need, data just becomes an added burden without benefits.”