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Reclaiming Profitability: Farming Smarter in

Albert Lea, MN

ProfitProAG

Farm Profitably, Live Healthy:

Top 10 Takeaways from ProfitProAG's Winter Conference

Have you heard? High inputs are nothing to brag about—but most farmers over-fertilize. Don't be a junkie who's addicted to tillage or chemicals. If your crop residue is celebrating its fifth birthday, your soil is unhealthy.

Useful wisdom like this defined ProfitProAG's 2026 Winter Conference: Reclaiming Profitability: Farming Smarter in 2026 and two-day Soil Health School in late February. Here are 10 highlights:

- 1. Managing fertilizer efficiently pays.** Russell Hedrick, a featured speaker at the Winter Conference, is best known for raising a record-shattering 459.91 bushels per acre for dryland corn in 2022 using regenerative, no-till methods and a cover crop mix. This Hickory, North Carolina, farmer has proven there are ways to cut back on fertilizer without sacrificing yield potential.

Hedrick pays close attention to the Haney test's water-extractable organic carbon (WEOC), which measures the microbes' food source—specifically, organic carbon. "Split-applying nitrogen keeps the nitrogen from burning up the organic matter in the soil," he said. "The biggest thing about proper nutrient management is timing." This has helped Hedrick cut his input costs, especially nitrogen (sometimes up to 70% or 80%), while growing yields. In addition, Hedrick credits foliar fertilizer applications as one of the management decisions that help him produce high-yield soybeans.
- 2. Supercharge your soil with algae.** Live-cell green algae, can offer a powerful resource to help you get more from your acres. Hedrick has used EnSoil Algae™ for the past several years to boost his crop's yield potential. EnSoil Algae, which is available through ProfitProAG, harnesses the power of *Chlorella vulgaris* (Latin for "common green") to build the soil biology bank. EnSoil Algae™ spurs rapid growth and replication among the beneficial microbes in the soil. "It 'wakes up' the beneficial microbes in your fields," Hedrick said. "This helps improve the biological function of your soil without breaking the bank."
- 3. Re-think tillage with the FIST approach.** Reducing or eliminating tillage is a key to building soil health and farming more profitably. That doesn't mean there's never a reason for tillage. Ray "The Soil Guy" Archuleta favors the FIST (frequency, intensity, scale, timing) model when deciding to till or not to till. Do you till all your fields out of habit, or do you use tillage for specific needs only on specific acres? That's taking scale into account. Also, if some tillage is necessary, till in the cold, when soil temperatures are below 50 degrees, since soil microbes are less active.
- 4. Take a cue from the Oat Mafia.** Growing more diverse crop rotations, including small grains, is a key to building soil health and protecting water quality. Farmers like Martin Larsen are proving the viability of raising a third crop in rotation at scale. This fifth-generation farmer grows corn, soybeans and small grains on 1,400 acres near Byron, Minnesota. As a member of the "Oat Mafia," he's interested in diversifying his crop rotations with small grains and is focused on water quality improvement. "Getting

out of just a corn-soybean system is good,” said Larsen, who’s also a conservation technician with the Olmsted County Soil and Water Conservation District. “Oats and other small grains are very ‘nitrate smart.’ Oats can root 2 to 3 feet deep, and their fibrous root systems are good at scavenging up nitrates.”

- 5. Build soil health to help reduce or eliminate insecticides.** Neonicotinoids are widely used in farming to control pests like aphids, but these insecticides are brutal, Archuleta said. Did you know there are 1,700 beneficial insects for every one pest insect? That means when you spray insecticide to kill one pest, you also risk killing 1,700 beneficial insects. Focus instead on building healthier soil, which grows healthier, more insect-resistant crops. Protecting beneficial insects also means you can fight bad bugs with good bugs, Archuleta said. “Nature is self-healing, self-organizing and self-regulating, if you don’t destroy it. When you farm more regeneratively, the first things you can get rid of are insecticides.”
- 6. Set goals.** Don’t just go through the motions, and don’t get mesmerized by focusing mainly on top yields. “I’m not worried about yield; I’m worried about return on investment,” said Tom Cotter, a southern Minnesota farmer who participated in a farmer panel during the Winter Conference. That’s why he focuses on details and grades his cover crops, as to how well they’re growing—and why. Asking the right questions is essential to improving soil health, he noted. “It’s about rethinking the way you farm. My goal is to unlock the secrets of the soil. I look at myself as a caretaker first, and a farmer second.”
- 7. Pick one positive change and make it a habit.** Americans are exposed to chemicals of all kinds throughout the day, from personal care products to food. “Our livers are in overdrive as they try to cleanse these toxins from our bodies,” said Jolene Carlson, a sustainable farmer, and holistic health and fitness director for the Minnesota National Guard. It doesn’t help that many Americans don’t get enough exercise, don’t sleep enough and consume foods that are deficient in many key vitamins and minerals. Prioritize your health goals, Carlson advised, but don’t try to tackle everything at once. If you only change only a few things about your lifestyle, consume more minerals (organ meats are a rich source), walk for 10 minutes after you eat, and focus on proper sleep, she said. “Do one thing until it’s a habit, and then pick another habit to work on.”

That’s called habit stacking, said Carlson, who recommends the book “Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones,” by James Clear. “Remember, there’s no such thing as perfection, just progression,” she added.
- 8. Save money with conventional hybrids.** What if you could spend \$100 less per bag on seed? How about saving \$200—without sacrificing return on investment? “Look hard at conventional versus traited seed,” said Mike Parkinson, a key account manager with Legend Seeds who spoke at the Winter Conference. “It’s a myth you can’t produce good yields with conventional hybrids.” Modern conventional hybrids are more resistant to diseases like tar spot, Goss’s wilt and Southern rust. Biologicals also play a key role in maximizing your seed investment. “Thanks to advances in biologicals the last several years, you can take any hybrid and improve it dramatically,” added Parkinson.
- 9. Make the Recipe for Success work on your farm.** There are a lot of factors you can’t control in farming, like the weather, commodity prices or fertilizer prices. “That’s why it’s so important to control the controllables,” said Dr. Jim Ladlie, founder and owner of ProfitProAG. “The ProfitProAG team is ready to help you develop a ‘Recipe for Success’ that’s customized to your unique needs on your specific acres to help you boost your profit potential in 2026.”
- 10. Focus on freedom.** Many farmers complain they don’t make any money in agriculture. “It’s because we give it away,” said Archuleta, who noted that regenerative farming practices that improve soil health offer a better way. “The more you cut unnecessary costs, the more money you’ll have in your bank account. Each step down this regenerative path is a step towards freedom.”