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WG TOOLBOX

Web-Based Platform to Aid Growers Track & Accumulate Data

For several years now, Hank Giclas, Western Growers senior vice president of science, technology and strategic planning, has had a vision for a web-based platform that could help growers accumulate, store and regurgitate the data they need to provide to both government officials and the buyer community about the products they grow and ship.

That vision is rapidly becoming reality. Giclas and his colleagues, both in and out of the WG headquarters, are ready to beta test the so-named Western Growers Toolbox, that will give growers resources at their fingertips to comply with buyer and government mandates, as well as tools to assess their operations in several different areas.

As food safety compliance has become more burdensome and as the government need for tracking compliance becomes more mandatory, Giclas said technology has also advanced but no one has aggregated all that information into one area.

He and his team made the WG Toolbox presentation to the Science & Technology Committee of the Western Growers Board of Directors in mid-March and received approval to move the WG-funded effort forward.

“Essentially we are building a site that will be accessible to members so that they can deal with the many technical issues that they face every day,” he said. “This site will contain a ‘toolbox’ of applications that can be customized by each member to fit their specific needs and to both provide and manage data and information that will help them with their goals.”

The WG vice president said the goal is to continue to add applications to this toolbox as the need arises but initially they are developing applications to help growers in the area of risk assessment, water and nutrient management, regulatory compliance and environmental stewardship.

Giclas and Diane Wetherington, executive vice president of Intertox, WG’s third party contractor on this project, ran through the presentation for the WG Committee members giving them a sneak preview of how the toolbox will work.

Giclas said each member will develop their own customized page that will be accessible by password and built through easy-to-use drop down menus. To begin with, the member, or a third party data processor, will populate the data entry page with information about the grower’s farming operation, including the crops grown, location and the various reports or guidelines that must be complied with. For example, the data page will include “Buyer Guidelines” that a grower must follow. If Grower A’s crop is sent to Arkansas Retailer B, the need to comply with that retailer’s specific guidelines will become part of that grower’s customized site.

The Risk Assessment tool within the WG Toolbox will take the WG member through the actual assessment, once again utilizing an easy-to-use drop-down menu format. That format will allow a grower to add ranch maps and access information about adjacent properties that might be a factor in his operation.

"Within this section we will have all the guidelines necessary to support the requirements of the Produce Rule, for example," Giclas said.

Of course, once all the inputs are present, the program will analyze results and issue the compliance documents that the grower needs.

As a member moves through the WG Toolbox, the other areas currently included such as Water and Nutrient Management, will operate similarly. The user will be presented with questions that will lead to the accumulation of necessary data and customized reports for the grower.

The Regulatory Center will include updated information concerning regulations that the grower concerned might need to know about. For example, on the data page, the grower will have indicated which countries he might ship his product to. The Regulatory Center page will alert him to any new MRL (maximum residue level) changes in the regulations, and inform the grower if his product can legally be shipped to these countries based on his inputs and test results.

The Stewardship application is being designed to allow the grower to keep track of his use of resources, such as energy and water, to help manage costs and create benchmarks for internal use or to prove to buyers progress made in that area.

Giclas said the entire concept is still a work in progress but it's moving rapidly toward launch. In mid-March, he said Western Growers and Intertox were looking for some growers to test drive the system to help to refine and perfect it. In addition, because PMA and WG have both been working on several of the issue areas that may be addressed by tools that may assist both suppliers and buyers — Giclas has approached and briefed PMA staff on the toolbox to gauge their interest in collaboration.

Wetherington and Giclas said they were not attempting to replace any data management system employed by individual WG members currently but that they would like to be able to work with other companies to link the Toolbox with private applications to easily import information into the Western Growers based program. "We are working on that right now," said Wetherington.

But in any event she said Western Growers and Intertox will help members create their individual pages within the program. "We want to make this as easy as possible," she said. "And if that means inputting lots of raw data ourselves, we will do that."

Giclas said, to date, the entire effort is being underwritten by Western Growers and a rollout and business plan have yet to be developed. Western Growers is attempting to not reinvent the wheel and hopes to interface with already-existing programs in some collaborative way to facilitate the gathering and dissemination of information. "It's possible that we will make available proprietary programs from third party providers through this toolbox," he said. "At this point we are looking to discuss useful applications with providers and growers and will likely be making several available for test later this year."

Giclas said the entire concept has multi benefits to both the grower and the industry at large. In the first place, he hopes that by working with interested members, he can tailor this to be a great member-benefit. More efficient and cost effective data management, data aggregation that allows benchmarking and trend analysis, regulatory tracking and monitoring systems will facilitate and ease compliance with regulations and buyer mandates. It will also help the grower keep track of the increasing number of regulations and forms that it must fill out in the course of doing business. "Our goal is that the data can be input once and then be pushed out in many different ways."

For example, he said the water and nutrient data can feed into risk assessments, stewardship reports and might be used to comply with water quality regulations.

And he said as new regulations come down the pike and new technologies developed, they will be able to be added to the WG Toolbox for future use.

Another key opportunity is to combine data to help the association and the industry deal with issues and provide aggregate data when it serves a useful purpose. “In today’s political, regulatory and even media arenas, it is far more powerful to come forward with quantitative data and information to back up our fight for the future of agriculture in California and Arizona” said Giclas “than to rely on anecdotes and qualitative information.” For example, when evaluating testing programs (frequency, target, amounts etc.) data will be necessary to back up the proposed changes. It is also useful in the public policy and media arenas to be able to tell what agriculture has done and is doing to optimize the use of nitrogen fertilizers while the state is focused on regulating nitrate. It even helps industry improve or can provide early warnings such as know when a particular water quality criteria is moving out of a baseline range ... and if that is happening to a single operator or many.

Giclas said users of the WG Toolbox own their own data and will always have control over that but that Western Growers will ask them to share information anonymously and confidentially so that WG can aggregate it and put it to beneficial use for the entire industry as well as the individual companies.

As this concept is developed over the ensuing year, Giclas sees it as being a wonderful resource for individual growers and the industry alike.