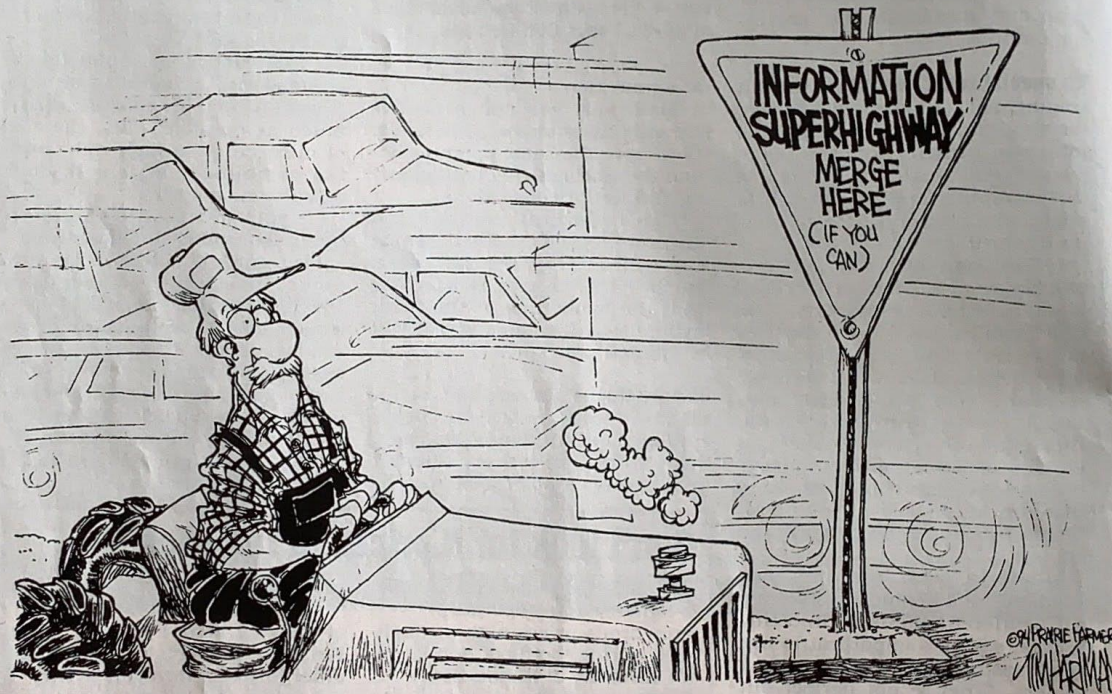




# Will farmers need their own lane on the information superhighway?

BY CARI NOGA



Computer networks and other futuristic technology could flourish if farmers find it boosts their bottom line

**A**ny farmer who ever hung a "slow-moving vehicle" sign on the back of a hay wagon knows you still need to use caution when you're on the road.

But there's a new highway under construction that apparently won't demand such caution. Soon, knowing how to merge onto the "information superhighway" may be as important for farmers as knowing the way to the local grain elevator.

The information superhighway

is a catch-all term for a future hybrid technology that will combine features of computers, cable television and telephones. Supposedly, it will provide instant access to whatever type of information you want, whether it be election results on another continent, scores from every conceivable sports competition, or just local information, like the garbage pickup schedule.

But what about information like the latest commodity quotes

— or other pieces of agricultural data not readily available to most farmers without a satellite dish in their backyard? How about worldwide weather information that leads you to plant more acres to beans than corn this year, if, for example, Brazil's crop is washed away by weeks of rain? Will you need a new information link for this kind of decision? Or will the local news suffice?

**Road map.** Finding the way onto

the information superhighway will be "a critical issue" for farmers, according to David Lins, University of Illinois ag economics professor.

Unlike their urban counterparts, who may cruise the superhighway just for the fun of it, farmers will approach the on-ramp only if they see green.

"It's just like anything else. You will find them using it if it's going to make them more profitable," Lins says.

Jim Gill, director of commodities for the Illinois Farm Bureau, agrees. "It helps on the production side, as well as the marketing side. They can play the 'what if game, the management game," he says.

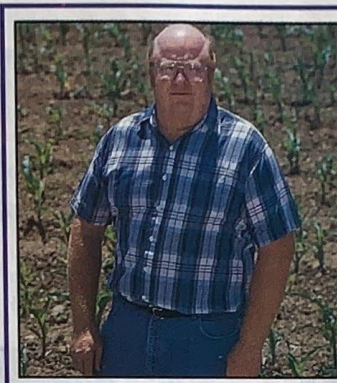
Farmers certainly don't need to be told their ranks are dwindling, nor that agriculture ignorance is increasing. But in the Information Age, those two trends could have serious consequences. Given their small numbers, will farmers be an attractive enough market for the highway builders to construct ag lanes?

Presently, farmers do have on-ramps to an information superhighway of sorts: Omaha-based Data Transmission Network, or DTN, and Farm Dayta, a service conceived by the Illinois Farm Bureau and now operated by Des Moines-based Broadcast Partners. Annual subscriber fees range from \$440 to \$840, depending on which of the various packages you choose. In addition, start-up fees range from \$150 to \$300.

Both services use satellite technology or radio bands to provide commodity quotes, regularly-updated weather information and news, particularly news related to agriculture. Much like premium cable channels, subscribers can also purchase supplementary information sources.

"We basically invented this business," boasts Kevin Dickey, DTN's regional sales manager for Illinois and Wisconsin. "Progressive farmers just jumped all over it, and it took off like a rocket."

However, after it was introduced in 1985, DTN's growth leveled off in 1989, and the service has maintained a relatively flat subscriber base of about 75,000 since then. Meanwhile, FarmDayta has been "growing at a fast and furious pace" since it was taken over by Broadcast Partners four years ago, according to Joy Johnson, marketing manager. FarmDayta now estimates about 30,000 subscribers nationwide,



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— HARFORD

compared to 22,000 in 1993 and 17,000 in 1992.

"The information is becoming more and more essential for them to have," says Johnson, explaining FarmDayta's increasing popularity.

Doug Harford, a farmer in Mazon, Ill., has found another access road to the information superhighway: the agribusiness "bulletin board" set up as part of the Financial Forum on CompuServe, a nationwide computer network on-line service.

Such "on-line" computer services — where customers use a modem to connect their personal computer to a network through a telephone line — are starting to see a potential market for agricultural functions.

Here, people can send messages to each other (often called "E-Mail") or participate in "conference calls" with other subscribers — using a computer, not a telephone, to express their opinions.

"Information is going to control our lives, and the access to information is going to define our operations," Harford says.

While he considers himself to be a "fringe" information superhighway traveler, Harford finds the on-line discussions on topics ranging from environmental issues to the floods of 1993 interesting and beneficial to his farm operation.

"It's more like a coffee shop," he says. "The discussions (on the network) are so enlightening."

**Applied information.** The information superhighway will mean more to farmers than just sitting at a desk, however. Once the information is in hand, it must be applied. As technology advances at a pace so dizzying that farmers find it difficult to digest, Lins believes one of the effects of the information

superhighway will be that farmers will need to relinquish control of the wheel of the tractor, planter or combine.

"As we move more fully into the future of the Information Age, I believe you will see more purchased services," Lins says.

One example is variable rate technology — or programming farm equipment to react to individual areas in each field. Lins uses the example of a 400-acre field, with a variety of soil fertility levels. Farmers test for fertility and map out the results, entering all the data in a computer.

"Through a satellite linkup, you basically direct the machine to apply varying amounts of fertilizer and seed," Lins says.

If it sounds time-consuming and difficult, take heart. "All the farmer really has to do is make a decision as to whether it's worth it," Lins says. In the Information Age, someone else will provide the actual service for you.

But the first step to facing those decisions is getting on the information superhighway. However farmers choose to "get on," the important thing is that they start their travels and begin to weed out what's useful.

"We still see a little hesitation. Here's all this information — What am I going to do with it?" says Dickey. "(But) once the system gets info to a farmer's place, they get somewhat addicted."

Harford also believes farmers will need access to the information superhighway. "There are going to be two classes of people. Those who don't have access, and those who do," he says. "As we become more challenged to be competitive, don't we need the information as much as any other business?" — *Cari Noga is editor of Country View, an agriculture supplement to the Journal-Standard in Freeport, Ill.* □