



TEST PLOT FEVER



tions that yield maps reveal within each field. "You begin to understand how hard it is to pin down 5% or 10% differences in test plots."

He hopes that this year's narrow-row corn results are an anomaly. "I was really optimistic about narrow rows," he says. "But when we compared 30" and 22" rows, the narrow rows showed an average 5-bu. decrease in yield. I wouldn't have been surprised if we didn't get a yield increase. But I didn't expect yields to go down."

"I know you can't hang your hat on one year's data, and I still think narrow rows are worth a look. But I'm glad I didn't jump into it based on information I read."

Pitstick also ran a Bt corn test. Across five replications on 40 acres, Bt

corn outyielded the same variety without Bt by an average 17.3 bu. per acre. "From what I've seen, Bt corn is going to be fabulous," he says.

"But I also found the newest non-Bt varieties still outyield the Bt varieties, which are older genetics. So I'll take it slow on Bt corn until they get it into the high-yielding varieties."

"The one place where I did see a consistent yield kick was when I pushed populations up toward 32,000," he says. "These tests weren't scientifically designed, but the results were so consistent, I have to think about bumping up populations."

"In next year's test, I want to combine population comparisons with planter speed comparisons," he continues. "Am I gaining enough in accuracy at the slower speed to justify planting 20 acres less a day and planting a few days longer?"

So far, Pitstick's test plots have inspired far more questions than answers. Every map of every field reminds him how little we know about the complex relationship between weather, soil and plant genetics.

But there's always next year—new weather, new genetics, new ideas, new insights into what's really going on out there. He can hardly wait. *FJ*

MORE THAN 100 ACRES of corn test plots merely whetted Steve Pitstick's appetite for data. Built-in Bt and high populations showed promise in 1996. But 22" rows fizzled. "The last thing I expected was for yields to go down," he says. "There's so much to learn."

comparisons unless you wanted to mess with weigh wagons at harvest, which I sure didn't," he says. "This new technology is what makes on-farm test plots practical."

The only time-consuming part of his test plot program was planning the plots during the winter, Pitstick adds. "It did take a few extra hours at planting time, which was tough. But when I look at all the information the plots gave me to study this winter, it was definitely time well spent."

In 1996, plots ranged from a narrow-row corn test that was scientifically replicated and randomized by a university agronomist to informal—but informative—population comparisons. "One of the main things I've learned is that you really have to do a lot of replications to get information that means anything," he says, pointing out the huge natural yield varia-

BY ROBIN HOFFMAN

While half the world complains about information overload, Steve Pitstick can't seem to get enough. He has barely begun to sift through the results from 120 acres of 1996 on-farm test plots, and he's happily dreaming about next year's data.

With Ted Nugent blasting on his computer's CD player, Pitstick clicks through his yield maps and admits that he's hooked. "That old saying about information is true," he says. "The more you get, the more you want."

The Maple Park, Ill., crop and hog producer wasn't always a data junkie. He used to be content with settling for best-guess decisions like everyone else. Then yield monitors and computerized mapping systems came along.

They suddenly revealed each field as a mysterious jigsaw puzzle of wildly varying yields. They also gave him a glimpse of the massive amount of detailed knowledge he needs to guide his crop operation into the next century.

To speed up the information-gathering process, Pitstick decided he needed his own on-farm testing program. "Before yield monitors and global positioning, there really wasn't much point in trying to do side-by-side