

Dale Opheim speaks at ProAg meeting.

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By Dick Hagen

"Once you get your soybeans planted, its spray, spray, spray." Hearing an Iowa farmer make that comment makes you wonder why he doesn't try Roundup Ready soybeans. Or is he one of the few producers making a pitch for foliar feeding and routine insecticide treatments of his soybeans?

Well, in a sense that's exactly what Dale Opheim is doing. Except this Iowa farmer who grows about 3,000 acres of corn, soybeans and popcorn in Palo Alto County, Iowa, also raises soybeans and rice in Brazil. Opheim in fact is now a '4-year veteran' of farming in Brazil and shared some of the pros and cons of his Brazilian farming adventures at the March 27 ProAg of Renville County annual meeting.

"It's not for the faint hearted. Our farm is about 620 miles from the export outlet at Ports of Sao Louis in northeast Brazil. Brazilian roads are not so good in these rural areas. So if rains catch you as your soybeans are being trucked to market, you've got some real problems. Trucks taking 2-3 weeks from farm to port are common, related Opheim.

The rain season is October into April in the Brazilian state where Opheim and his Nebraska farming partner have their 5,000 hectare operation (12,500 acres). And what a rain season—60 to 80 inches during this 6-month period with 4-6 inch storms often happening. However soils are so porous that planters can be running 2 days after a 6-inch cloudburst. Temperatures run 70 degrees to 90 degrees year-round in that same area, which is only about 600 miles south of the equator.

So why are soybeans sprayed so often in the area where Opheim farms? No, it's not for soybean rust. That plague has still to work its way that far north in Brazil. Its southern Brazilian soybean fields that are devastated by rust without frequent sprayings. However Opheim's soybean crop is sprayed up to 6 times each growing season mostly to control caterpillars, a voracious critter that can strip soybean plants in a matter of hours.

"The most popular piece of machinery in Brazilian agriculture is crop sprayers. Aerial applicators also are now doing huge amounts of work in Brazil. And their current charge is only \$2 per acre. But fields running 3-4 miles long are common so once that airplane gets cranking there's not much wasted time turning around," noted Opheim.

Soybeans in his area are Group 9 maturity. Soils are continually warm so newly planted soybeans are sprouted and row identifiable 3-4 days after planting, which is in 17-inch rows. Because towns and implement dealers are sparse in this area, most farmers have several smaller planters, like 20' wide units rather than big 36-row and 48-row units. Why? Because if you have a breakdown, it could be 48 hours or more before you've got that problem taken care of. "Instead, we're planting for example with four smaller planters so if one of those breaks down, we still have three units planting. If two breakdown, than we can salvage parts from either of these two units to keep the other two units going," explained Opheim.

Weeds just aren't yet a problem on much of this newly cleared farming land in this part of Brazil. Thus there is no need to use Roundup Ready soybean seed and that's why seed costs for Opheim's Brazilian operations are about half the seed costs for his Iowa farm.

Land that was costing the equivalent of \$125 per acre four years ago is now about \$400 per acre. Clearing that land of the wild brush, roots and vines cost another \$125 per acre four years ago. Land cleaning today is also now about \$400 per acre. "Uncleared land is costing about \$1,000 per hectare today. We plan on cleaning about 1,000 hectare each year for the next 3 years on our land and that will complete the entire 5,000 hectare operation for cropping," said Opheim.

Working with a trusted neighbor is the key to farming in Brazil for Opheim. His neighboring farmer runs 50,000 acres crop land and 'custom' farms all of Opheim's operation as well. That means providing the machinery and labor for planting, harvesting, and tilling both Opheim's soybean crop and his dry land rice crop. This custom operator gets 30 percent of gross sales for his time, investment, and stewardship.

"I get to Brazil maybe 2-3 times a year. My custom farmer does a terrific job for us so even though farming in Brazil is an adventure, and still a challenge, his talents have certainly lessened my concerns about crop production."

"You read a lot about American farmers still going to Brazil and getting involved in agriculture. But the reality is that there are very few American farmers attempting to make that move. The majority of the big acreage operations in Brazil are run by European and Japanese farmers. Native Brazilian people in my area are subsistence farmers at best, living in cheap houses with kids walking 3-5 miles to their shabby 1-room schools. But the kids are clean, very polite, and discipline is simply not a problem for the teacher."

Sensing the needs of these rural schools, Opheim and his farming partner now routinely provide financial help to the rural school in their area. "This experience is a humbling experience for me. I no longer take for granted the productive power of Iowa farms, Minnesota farms, etc., because I see the production ability of this huge country also. Brazil is already #1 in soybeans, beef, broilers, sugar cane, oranges. Their infrastructure needs tremendous help. Fraud and thievery is fairly rampant also. But the people are patient, kindly, and very much willing to work.

Opheim says young boys will ride the 'jump seat' on big combines for 2-3 years just to learn all the details of running this machine in hopes that they will then have the 'driving' job. That moves them up the pay scale of \$5 per day as a rider to \$10 a day as a driver.

Cleaning fields also involves lots of hand labor. Here the older natives do this chore getting \$5 a day for picking roots, stems, chunks, whatever is needed to plant that first crop after 2 years of land clearing. Often that first crop is millet....a fast growing grass that provides significant organic matter when disked down prior to soybeans being planted.

He grow dryland rice every 4th year in the soybean-rice rotation. The 2005-06 season, just wrapping up proved too dry for rice so Opheim says this is his poorest rice harvest. But late season rains caught his soybeans just in time and he's talking a 55-bushel soybean yield.

Beans are priced according to the Chicago Board of Trade, however the current basis is \$1.50 below CBOT so soybean's are not making money in Brazil this year. Opheim reminded his Renville County farm audience to be thankful for the USDA farm program and LDPs. "Brazilian farmers would love to have this price support program. Plus right now the currency is about half the value of two year ago.

He showed figures on soybean production costs for US versus Brazil versus Argentina.