

From Boots on the Ground: Using Data Management Platforms in the Field

Description:

Hear from Randy Pequignot about his journey as a field supervisor for Del Monte AND data management administrator. He uses software to accumulate Ag data from contract of growers through to the processing of snap beans. Randy gives a great view of what is important to him and how data management has helped his operation and his time management. It is always great to hear the voice of the customer of new technology!

Speaker:

- Randy Pequignot, Field Supervisor Del Monte

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Welcome to PMA Takes On Tech. The podcast that explores the problems, solutions, people, and ideas that are shaping the future of the produce industry. I'm your host, Vonnie Estes vice president of technology for the Produce Marketing Association. And I've spent years in the Ag-tech sector. So I can attest, it's hard to navigate this ever-changing world in developing and adopting new solutions to industry problems. Thanks for joining us and for allowing us to serve as your guide to the new world of produce and technology. My goal of the podcast is to outline a problem in the produce industry and then discuss several possible solutions that can be deployed today.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

This episode of PMA takes on tech is sponsored by CropTrak. CropTrak helps food and beverage companies improve their supply chain management from contracts, all growing activities, sustainability, and ESG management to grower settlements. To learn how your entire supply chain operations can work more efficiently, go to CropTrak.com/PMA. Welcome to today's episode with Randy Pequignot, a field supervisor of Snap Beans in Illinois with Del Monte. He has been at this job for 26 years and with Del Monte for 30 years. So he knows his stuff.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

If you want to hear how folks in the field are thinking about data management and adopting technology, Randy is your guy. It's so important for people who are developing technology to hear from people like Randy. He talks about what the needs are in data management from the field perspective, how data is used? What form it needs to be in, and that it needs to play well with other

data. He also talks about the journey of adopting technology. This is truly a boots on the ground conversation.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Hello, my name's Randy Pequignot, and I'm a field supervisor with Del Monte Foods here in North America, and based out of Central Illinois. And being a field supervisor, my main task is contracting and raising Snap Beans for canning purposes. I've been a field supervisor with Del Monte for, this is my 26th year as a field supervisor. It's my 30th year as a Del Monte employee counting some seasonal years before becoming a field supervisor.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So we grow and raise snap beans, early source and late source here in Illinois for our production facilities in Wisconsin. And an auxiliary part of my job is we accumulate all of our Ag data from starting the crop, contracting, all the way through, till it's being dumped at the plant. So for traceability and sustainability processes through the whole growing season, we use this platform for everything we need to do.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And how long have you been using that technology for?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I've been working for about seven years. The last three years has been our main jump into going full board. We run from like I say, contracting all the way through payment. And so we do electronic contracts. We're able to schedule our [plantings 00:04:05] And keep track of all the scouting's and sprays and everything in a one place live environment. So everybody can keep up with it live basically, real time.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Did you jump into using it for all those different things at the very beginning and/or have you incrementally used different parts of the platform as time has gone on?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Incrementally different parts of the platform as time has went on. We first started in with just as a mapping program and have moved up, stair stepped with them. As they've grew, we have grew with them in parts of the platform that they offer. One of the biggest things that we use and I guess goes along with the climate situation is weather data. And so our older system that we did use, we would collect weather data on basically one or two weather stations in a 60 mile area. We can get it down to a two mile grid and basically we're collecting weather data on a per field basis instead of a per 60 square mile area.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So that is helping us be able to schedule our plantings to in the end run, have our harvest come off in a streamlined a way where the plant stays full and we're not over-producing or under-producing on a daily basis.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

So how are you thinking about managing supply chain efficiencies, now in 2021, after all the changes that we've experienced?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

From the field side of it, weather's the biggest player for us and it comes down to a lot of, with the newer technology out there, it's helping us schedule a lot more, scheduled better, more I should say. And that's really, it's really helping us in the long run in that way.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah, like you were just saying, as far as getting, having the right amount of product, get in to the plant, to the processing plant, that kind of scheduling, it really helps with efficiencies, right?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yes. Naturally we don't want to overproduce and not be able to get it canned and we don't want to under produce and run short on days at the facilities.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. There are many data tools available to help farmers manage their operations. What is the most important to you for a data solution?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Being in the veg industry, I mean, there's a lot of data platforms out there and in the veg industry, it's kind of, there's a lot of corn and soybean platforms out there but the veg industry-

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

There sure are.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yes. But the veg industry you really, I mean, we do things different than the corn and soybean guys and to have a platform that's dedicated to you. There's just not that many out there. To us or another user they're not the same. It's the same base canvas, but it's totally customized in basically the language that we use in our business practice instead of just a generic program.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

In the using and adopting, there must have been a lot of back and forth of you explaining what you needed and then them iterating and making changes. And then you trying that, was there a lot of that kind of cycling that happened?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yes, there was.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. I was talking to a couple of the people at the company and they were saying that everybody's, a lot of their customers, they use different languages for, different words to describe things. And so they kept having to change things because people in one part of the country or would use a different language to explain something. And so that keeps them on their toes, I think.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

It does. Yeah, we have run into many little things like that, even in other Del Monte locations. Weeds are called different things. I mean, it's the same weed, but they have a different name or a bug has that, is the same bug, but it has a different name in different locations of the US. So we've run across that just internally.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

So you talked about weather information, but what kinds of other information do you need real time to manage your supply chain?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So we do electronic tickets, field tickets. So we know in real time when the truck is in the field, it's being loaded. It's loaded in, on the road, it's arrived at the plant. It's been weighed in/ it's basically on deck to be dumped. So all those steps are real time, so we can have an idea how many loads we need to be picking. Do we need to slow down a little bit, speed up a little bit, to keep the plant full of product?

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

How many acres do you have? Is it all in the same spot or is it spread out over the Midwest? Or are you mostly in Illinois in a certain locale?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I'm based out of Central Illinois, but I mean, we have locations in the state of Washington, California, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Illinois.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And they all have someone with a role like yours? And is there one plant per each of those locations or are you driving to different facilities?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

All of my product goes to our two facilities in Wisconsin, our two bean facilities. The main bean growing area is in central Wisconsin, corn and peas is in Washington, and fruit is in California and also in Washington. So yes, at all those locations there is people just like me in the, as field supervisors,

working with the growers on a day-to-day basis of producing the best quality crop we can with the least amount of inputs to grow that crop.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And are these contract growers or are they... How does that framework work? Are they growers that work for Del Monte or are they growers that then sell to Del Monte?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Contracts growers.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Okay. Very cool. So looking at climate related stresses, how is Del Monte responding to the impact of climate related stresses on your farm operations or the supply chain overall?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Varietal is a big one for us on the field side. Del Monte, 90 plus percent of the beans that we grow are Del Monte's known varieties. And bred for the color, quality and taste that that is a Del Monte bean. And we're always looking, our breeders are always looking for new traits in our bean varieties that will help with basically... Like I said before, weather is a big player is, in our harvest ability and growing the beans is we want an upright bush to keep the airflow down between the rows.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So if we do get some rains, they will dry out, but you want enough canopy that will shade the weeds. And then the upright bush will keep the beans up off the ground even if you get a heavy storm, it not totally but it'll help keep the beans up off the ground, which helps in quality issues. And then bring in disease packages. So we could spray less and so forth.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Where is the breeding done for the beans?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Wisconsin is where our been grow, our been breeders are located. We grow a lot of the seed out in Washington, state of Washington, lot of push to increase nodulation on our varieties to use less fertilizer and so forth.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And are you seeing more extreme weather or any changes in weather? Have you seen a change over the last couple of years?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yeah. I would have to say yeah, the weather patterns seem to be a bigger swings in the weather patterns. It just don't seem like we can get a nice all day

inch rain anymore. If it's going to rain, we'll get a big storm and it'll rain for 15, 20 minutes and you'll get half inch to an inch. Which, I mean, everybody loves a rain, but sometimes when a rain comes that fast and furious, it doesn't get a chance to soak in and you get run off and you're not getting the value out of that rain. And then naturally with the storms you got, hail, wind and other things that bring in diseases and works only on the quality side of it.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. So are you breeding for more drought tolerance? Do they need to be more drought tolerant because you're getting less rain or is that a problem?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

No, everything we grow is irrigated so.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. So you can get the amount of water that you need?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yep.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. So how do you think the company will manage environmental stresses going forward?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I think with technology that's out there it has really improved what we've done, and like I say, our bean breeding program has really brought a lot to the party to help us, obtain those goals of a steady supply chain in the culture we're in right now with the weather and climate and so forth.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Do you grow different types of varieties in your particular area or/and do you get new varieties every year or how does the varieties change?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Well, we grow a couple of three different varieties. And we're always looking at new varieties that our breeders cross up. And it's awful tough, you'll find a variety that has one great trait, but it's a little lacking on a couple of other traits. And you might find a sister variety to it that's brings something to the party, but is lacking there also.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So it's tough to find that one variety that brings everything you need to be a success. So we look at many, many varieties and usually pick two or three a year to push forward to see how they're going to react in different locations also. So what works well in Wisconsin might not work well here in Illinois.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Or it might work well this year, but it doesn't work as well next year.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Definitely. Thus, you definitely want to look at it over a two three-year period.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And did the breeders come and interact with you and look and see how things are going in the field for data and feedback as well?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yes. Yes. Yep. We interact with them all year long, looking at trials and trying their new varieties and taking harvest measurements and growing qualities all through the growing season. So we talk back and forth with them, what we see on the Ag side that can be improved on or what is working well?

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And are you thinking about, or managing different factors for different crops like tomatoes versus carrots, versus peaches, for instance.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Not too much difference. I mean, in the big picture, they're all in the same boat with weather patterns, it's all relevant that via drought, heavy rain storms, it's all going to affect all the crops we do in the same way.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

So what is the biggest change produce farmers will face in the next two years or beyond?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I would say weather, probably the number one and help is going to be number two, is another big hurdle.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Definitely.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

So you can have all the technology in the world, but sometimes they don't get the manual labor done.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah, exactly. How is Del Monte working with your farmers to mitigate those particular challenges?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

We're able to, like I said before, drill that weather data down and we get daily weather reports. I mean, we don't have to go out and see where it did rain. We

can get that on a, in a real-time basis. That's going to help us manage when to water, when not to water? Fertilizer when to fertilize and when not to fertilize behind a big rain.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

If you were to talk to someone who hadn't adopt these types of tools, what kind of things would you tell them to make their journey easier in adopting technology? And should they adopt new technology?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I would always say, yes. Moving on the technology is a great thing. Like a lot of other things it's not cheap, and there's a lot of things out there. Is your return on investment going to be there? Jury's still out on that.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Would you look at that over a season or over a year, two years or over a decade? How do you look at it, evaluate your return on investment on those types of tools?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Well, some of that's yes, you got to look at the long-term, but some of the short term stuff, there's some water management tools out there that they would be great tools in heavier ground when to water, but in some of our sandier soils it's not when or water, it's when you can shut the water off. And so I guess it doesn't need to tell you when to water and that cost yeah, can be a pretty steep cost comparative to water, but everybody wants to save as much valuable resource of water that you can, so it's kind of a fine line in there. But data collection is great. I mean, you can collect all your data, run your numbers and then do some great comparisons in number crunching to get you where it is a return on investment or not.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah, I think one of the things I wonder about it is how deep do you have to get into a system before you figure out whether it has a good return on investment or not. I mean, you have to spend a lot of time to learn water management, any kind of data, farming management system, you have to spend your time to try to figure it out. So when you're looking at something, how do you make the decision of I'm going to go ahead and try that, this and see if it works and see if I get a return on investment.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yeah. I would say yeah, you can't do it. You can't look at it at a one year deal and going to see that return, because it is a big investment and a large step forward. But I would say time savings for us has been one of the huge additions and accessibility to all the information. I mean, prior to having this platform, where we all have it at our fingertips basically. The data prior to that

is if you needed a piece of data, you try to get ahold of somebody and they had to look it up in their three ring binder.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

And then you get the information and then pass it on to the person that needs it. But like I say, now with real time data, it's there. Anybody can use it from the plant side of it for quality issues that they're seeing or could be seeing to spray records, and scouting records, and planting records, and it's just all right there.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And you're all seeing it, all the people in those different roles that are making decisions. You're all seeing the same data at the same time, right?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Exactly.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah, that's fascinating. What was it like to go from the three ring binder to everybody having the same data? I mean, did that take a long time for people to figure out how do we work together on this and trust it, or was that pretty fast?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

It was pretty fast. I mean, like everything else, you're always going to have the naysayers that are going to buck change and there's... We thought it might be some of the older folks, but a fair share of the older folks took onto it more than maybe some of the middle-aged ones.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Oh, that's interesting.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Yeah. It surprised me. But no, it actually went pretty fast and pretty well. And it's making everybody's job easier. So I mean, that's a big hurdle. I mean, if we can make our jobs easier, you can get home maybe a little earlier in the day than 12, 14 hours, it might be 10 hour days. So it does. And maybe a lot of times, a lot less phone calls. "Well, I need this. I need that." Well, all they have to do now is just look it up. It's right there at your finger tips.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

And it also I assume, allows you to make some real time decisions instead of sometimes when you get data that is already two weeks old or stale, you're looking backwards and you're not able to make real time decisions in the moment of what to do and what to change.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

Most definitely. And like I said, with the harvest side of things, it has really been a great thing on the real-time data. So they can see, we have CropTrak linked up with a system we use in the facilities and we can actually see what they're processing in tons per hour. And we can see as we harvest, are we harvesting enough, are we not harvesting enough? And we can relay quality issues with all that information. So the plant knows, "Hey, there's some brown spot on these beans, maybe they need to slow down and clean them up a little better." So all that being real time where before is, "Yeah, you had to relay that and they had to make sure it got relayed to the right person." So all that is incorporated in the plant, their screens around, gives them all that data on a real time platform.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah, that's great. So you can respond to it happening now. You had mentioned that it was tied in with another system in your plant. And one of the complaints I hear about so many of these systems is people have old legacy systems and then they get some new app or something and nothing talks to each other. And so it sounds like in this situation that you've got two different systems that are able to communicate with each other, have you found that to be the case a lot with technology, or has that been a problem?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

No. So far everything that we use internally has linked very well. We use some different platforms for... Our aerial applicators use some of their own platforms and we can link directly with them. So it's been a lot of time savings of, instead of having to put it into three different programs, you put it into one and we can pick it up or send it to any of the others.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Yeah. Great. Well, is there anything else you want to mention about just adopting technology and what that journey has been like, or you think we've kind of got it covered?

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

I think we kind of got to covered. Yeah, it's definitely a journey. And like I said, jumping over the last 25 years of handwritten notes and trying to find where you wrote it down and when you wrote it down what you did? To being able to document it right now on the iPad or iPhone or your desktop, if you're at the office and having that live data real time is very valuable.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Great. Well, thank you very much for your time, Randy. I really appreciate it.

Randy Pequignot, Del Monte:

You're welcome.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

Randy touched on so many important things about adopting a data platform. Every operation is different and vegetables are certainly different from corn and soy. So we need to start with a platform that is tailored to our growing systems. Then a close collaboration with the tech provider, especially at this early stage of technology development is crucial. Use of the technology is iterative and both the developer and the customer need to work together. Maybe in the future, a company can just sell a platform, but we aren't there yet.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

So all platform companies need to have a consultant part of their company. It is an integral part of the product, not an extra pain. And how do we measure return on investment? As we use tools that look at increased efficiencies in the chain, we will be able to see increases in yields and decreases in costs of production from data management systems over time. For Randy, the biggest ROI to him is getting several hours of his day back and not constantly looking for those scraps of paper or binders.

Vonnie Estes, PMA:

That's it for this episode of PMA Takes on Tech. Thanks for allowing us to serve as your guide to the new world of produce and technology. Be sure to check out all our episodes at PMA.com and wherever you get your podcasts. Please subscribe, and I would love to get any comments or suggestions of what you might want me to take on. For now, stay safe, eat your fruits and vegetables, and we will see you next time.