

# Progressive FARMER

## INDEPENDENT TRIALS OFFER SEED INSIGHTS

- ▶ Strategies Save On Seed Costs
- ▶ Historic Plots Grow a Legacy

# Plots With Purpose

## *FIRST trials offer unbiased evaluation of commercial seed.*

In an age when high-speed, central-fill planters have wingspans that commonly rival commercial airliners, Klint Tucker's diminutive eight-row unit doesn't draw much attention—until you notice the two passengers riding atop it across the field.

Tucker is a regional field manager for Farmers' Independent Research of Seed Technologies (FIRST), and the folks on the planter aren't along for an afternoon joyride. Instead, they're tasked with depositing the contents of small seed packets into the specialized machine, allowing Tucker to plant four rows each of a specific corn hybrid or soybean variety every 40 feet across the field. When finished, they've created a patchwork quilt of dozens of commercial seed products for a replicated yield trial.

"The rest of the field will be planted by the cooperating farmer, and from there, every acre gets treated the same until we harvest the plot," Tucker explains. "It makes for real-world comparisons."

Since 1997, when FIRST founder Kevin Coey first tested 64 corn hybrids from 14 companies at 12 sites in Illinois, the organization has grown to extensively evaluate thousands of commercial seed products each season. The intent is to provide farmers with timely, unbiased data they can use to inform their seed-buying decisions and ultimately improve their profitability.

"We run trials anywhere corn and soybeans are grown in the Midwest, from the Red River Valley of North Dakota down to Missouri and from Kansas over to Ohio," says Matt Dahle, FIRST business manager. "Seed companies sponsor entries in our trials, and we independently test them. We'll place them in multiple locations, replicate the plots, collect the data and then publish it for farmers and the entire industry."

## > COMPARING APPLES TO APPLES

While many entities perform yield trials every year—from governments and universities to seed companies and individual farmers—FIRST has a unique ability to evaluate the performance of numerous seed products in an apples-to-apples comparison.

"There's a lot of people doing good research, but everybody does it a little bit different," says Dahle, who notes that in 2025, FIRST's trials included more than 2,000 corn hybrids and nearly 1,000 soybean varieties from more than 70 companies. The seed was evaluated on 275 farms across 60 regions in roughly a dozen states. "Our field managers follow the same research protocols, collect the same data, run the same statistical analyses. It allows for a consistent, objective view of how a product performs across a wide geography."

Dahle adds that farmers aren't the only ones looking for those head-to-head comparisons of seed performance. Some smaller seed companies choose to sponsor entries in the FIRST trials as a means of benchmarking their products against the competition.

*The height differences among corn hybrids in a FIRST corn plot in northwest Illinois are clearly visible from above.*

AERIAL PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRST



“We’re able to offer them independent, trusted data backed by the reputation we’ve built over the course of nearly 30 years,” he says. “It allows those smaller companies to focus their investments on product development rather than a fleet of plot planters and combines, and the crew to run them.”

Dennis Rawley is president and owner of Augusta Seed, a regional, independently owned seed corn company based in Verona, Virginia. He says that while the company’s research efforts include replicated yield trials, his business relies on FIRST to evaluate how Augusta Seed stacks up against competitors’ hybrids.

“You’re out there against the best of the best, so it’s important to us to have data that gives the customer confidence in our hybrids,” he says. “You know you’re not always going to ‘win,’ but you always want to be in the chase.”

In addition to providing apples-to-apples comparisons, FIRST also prioritizes timely distribution of its data. Dahle says the goal is to have yield results online within 48 hours of the plot combine leaving the field.



“We know that some farmers are already making seed decisions for the next season when we’re harvesting plots, so we want to get that data in their hands quickly,” he says. “We also want to get it out there for the companies that sponsored products in our trials so they can share it with their salespeople who are helping farmers select seed.”

## ➤ HOMEWORK PAST THE PLOTS

Despite all the data FIRST provides, Dahle says their efforts can’t replace the expertise of agronomists and other crop advisers when it comes to choosing the correct seed product for a specific field environment. Variables such as soil type, tillage, fertility and others will ultimately affect the performance of a corn hybrid or soybean variety.

“I would never tell a farmer to just blindly buy the No. 1 performer from the FIRST trials,” he says. “Could it do pretty well? Probably. But, will it be a perfect fit? No, because the conditions in your field won’t be exactly like those in the trial plot.”

Landon Aldinger, co-owner of Precision Farm Management, a family-owned seed and chemical sales business in Iowa Falls, Iowa, agrees. He says he doesn’t draw direct conclusions from FIRST or any other yield trials.

“We look for trends. We look for repeatability and positive correlations,” says Aldinger, who also farms and currently hosts FIRST trials. “Sometimes, guys take too direct of a correlation from those plots to their farms without considering the underlying characteristics of a field and understanding its history and specific management practices.”

Brandon Warren, who farms in southeast Illinois near Flora, also hosts both corn and soybean trial plots for FIRST—something his father started doing in the late 1990s. He says consulting trial data is just one part of the equation when making seed-buying decisions for his operation. ➤



FIRST manager Clint Tucker plants a soybean plot in southeast Illinois (top left). Packets of soybean seed are ready to be loaded onto the plot planter (above). Faith Camfield (left) records stand counts in corn trial plots in southwest Illinois.



“There’s not much independent research or plot data out there these days,” he notes. “Every company seems to win their own trials, but the FIRST plots aren’t biased one direction or the other. So, when it’s time to buy my seed, I do use those plots as much as I can. But, I also listen to what my dealer recommends, and I watch the neighbors, too.”

While he considers yield and agronomic benefits of trait packages when choosing seed, Warren adds the cost of seed is always a big factor in his decision-making process. More expensive seed doesn’t always translate to a more profitable crop.

“They don’t always pay the bills, do they?” he quips of the more expensive options.

Rawley says his family seed company tries to focus on bringing competitive hybrids to the market with “better prices than what farmers have been accustomed.

“But, you have to talk really loud to have a conversation about anything other than yield,” he adds. “Brand X has been a farmer’s favorite, and you’ve got to outperform it and

*Faith Camfield loads the plot planter with seed to create a border around a soybean trial (top). Clint Tucker changes seed plates as he switches from planting corn to soybeans at a FIRST plot location in southwest Illinois (bottom).*



SCAN TO REGISTER



**first** farmers' independent  
research of seed  
technologies

## Leverage the Power Of Trial Data

Learn more about interpreting seed trial results and making data-driven seed choices for your farm by attending a free webinar held by FIRST on Sept. 3, 2025. During the one-hour event, participants will discover how to navigate the FIRST trials database, find specific corn hybrids and soybean varieties, and compare results of seed performance across different environments. Scan the QR code (above) or visit <https://tinyurl.com/4y7fyxch> to register.

► Visit [www.firstseedtests.com](http://www.firstseedtests.com) for more information about FIRST.

have something else—whether that’s better standability and good yield, or faster drydown and good yield, or better plant health and good yield. Beyond that, we must have unparalleled service.”

Rawley says having Augusta Seed hybrids scrutinized side by side with offerings from larger seed companies allows him to have confidence in his products and offers his customers reassurance in their seed choices.

“When you’re counting on that hybrid for your livelihood, you darn sure want to know that you’ve got the right one,” he says.

And, that sentiment is the foundation upon which FIRST was conceived nearly three decades ago: timely, unbiased comparisons of innovative seed genetics to improve yield and profitability for farmers.

“Hopefully, at the end of the day, we’ve helped farmers make better seed decisions,” Dahle says. ///