



***farmdoc* at 20: How Did We Get Here and What Have We Learned?**

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This is the first in a series of articles celebrating the 20th anniversary of farmdoc.

The *farmdoc* project is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Going back to the beginning in 1999, the stated goal of the project was to provide, "one stop 'web-shopping' for agricultural risk management research and outreach for Illinois farmers and agribusinesses." Over the last 20 years, the project grew and changed more than any of us could have imagined at the start. As part of our 20th anniversary celebration, we have prepared nine *farmdoc daily* articles that provide an overview of the major subject matter areas addressed, highlights important contributions, and reviews changes that occurred during the last two decades. Today's article, the first in the series, provides an overview of the development of *farmdoc*, presents data on the impact of the project, and offers some lessons that we have learned along the way. A list of all nine articles in the series and authors can be found at the end of this article.

Development

The *farmdoc* project began in 1999 with initial funding from the Strategic Research Initiative for Information Systems and Technology of the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research (CFAR). It was obvious at the time that farmers and others in the agricultural sector were rapidly increasing their use of the Internet, desired information and decision analysis that was in an easily "consumable" form, and conveniently available online. A founding principle of *farmdoc* was that substantial demand existed and would continue to exist in the future for Extension programs dealing with traditional problems of commercial agriculture, such as agricultural finance, law, management, marketing, and policy. We set out to meet this demand by providing agriculture decision-makers with round-the-clock access to integrated information and expertise.

The various stages in the development of *farmdoc* over the last 20 years can be categorized into four major "versions," as outlined below:

1999, Version 1.0: Our first website was named Illinois Grain Risk Outreach, or *IGRO* for short. It was quite modest and was really just a webpage with links to existing webpages for farm financial analysis spreadsheets, crop insurance tools, and evaluation of market advisory services (AgMAS). We quickly abandoned the name and changed it to Farm Decision Outreach Central, or *farm.doc*. We later dropped

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the dot and shortened the name to [farmdoc](#) because it was easier to write and that was the way everyone said the name anyway. It has stuck ever since and is now an easily identifiable brand in the agricultural sector.

2000, Version 2.0: After gaining some experience with the first version of our website, we decided it was worth trying to use the new web technology as the centerpiece of a modern 21st century Extension program for commercial farms in Illinois. The first key step was hiring a website designer to help us figure out how to organize our material and design an attractive looking site. The second key step was the realization that we had to organize ourselves much differently to take advantage of this new delivery technology. This was the point when our “web-first” Extension delivery model was born. It entailed forming a team of faculty members with various Extension, teaching, and research appointments who agreed to place all of their Extension-oriented materials at the website and brand everything under the *farmdoc* umbrella. This was a momentous change compared to the traditional organization of Extension programs (see Irwin et al., 2004).

2003, Version 3.0: The next major revision of the [farmdoc](#) website included new and improved navigation and several additional sections. Much to our surprise, we learned early on that newsletters and other publications posted at the site, rather than tools or data, represented the bulk of the use. So, we reorganized the site in recognition of this reality. Another big change was the addition of a sponsorship program. The initial success in the early years led us to believe that a “web-first” model was the wave of the future, but continuing and staffing the project meant that we had to confront the issue of funding on a continuing basis. We considered advertising even at this early date, but it was very clear from conversations with farm users that this would be highly problematic. We were told over and over that the real value of *farmdoc* was the unbiased, third-party analysis that we provided. Farmers strongly feared that advertising would compromise our work. So, we adopted a public radio/TV sponsorship model that was more acceptable to our farm users. This has proven to be a workable funding mechanism and we continue to use it today.

2011, Version 4.0: By the mid-2000s, the smart phone and blogging revolutions were in full swing. We experimented in 2005 by developing a new site, *farmgate*, that used blog technology to present news and research summaries several times a week. We then made the decision to launch an entirely new website in 2011 called [farmdoc daily](#). In recognition of the need to stay relevant in a 24/7 news and information cycle, we came up with the audacious idea of publishing one article of original analysis on “Corn Belt farm economics” each and every business day. Over 2,000 articles later, we are still publishing *farmdoc daily* articles at this pace.

2016, Version 5.0: The next technological revolution occurred with social media. In response, we hired a social media manager for *farmdoc* and started another site called [Farm Policy News](#) that publishes several agricultural policy and economics news summaries each week. The project began pushing content through Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. The objective was to further expand the use of articles, news summaries, decision tools, and data found at our three websites ([farmdoc](#), [farmdoc daily](#), and [Farm Policy News](#)). Individual *farmdoc* team members also became active on social media and contributed to this objective.

2019, Version 6.0: Despite our “web-first” model, the *farmdoc* team never stopped offering traditional face-to-face Extension meetings. For example, we have offered a series of five regional meetings across Illinois every December that we call the “Illinois Farm Economic Summit.” These meetings regularly attract over 800 people in total. We also began experimenting with webinars in the last few years and these have been growing in popularity. In recognition of the ongoing “youtube” video revolution, a video and webinar manager was hired for the project. The intention is to offer a rich menu of video content as another vehicle for expanding use of *farmdoc* material.

Impact

An effort like *farmdoc* does not lend itself easily to traditional measures of Extension program quality and impact. Web traffic statistics provide an important indicator of the breadth of usage and impact for a digital Extension program like *farmdoc*. Figure 1 shows the annual number of unique visits to *farmdoc* project websites since 2002. Visits to the original *farmdoc* site increased rapidly through 2007, peaked at 1.5 million, declined for a few years, and then stabilized right around 1 million per year. The addition of the *farmdoc daily* site in 2011 ushered in a period of explosive growth in total project visits, with more

than 3 million in each of the last three years. To put this in perspective, an annual total of 3 million visits implies an average of 8,200 visits made to the three project websites each and every day through the year.

Visits to *farmdoc* sites occur regularly from every state in the U.S., but are most concentrated in Corn Belt states that account for about half of U.S. visits. The footprint of the project is now global, with almost 20 percent of visits occurring outside of the U.S. and from nearly every country in the world.

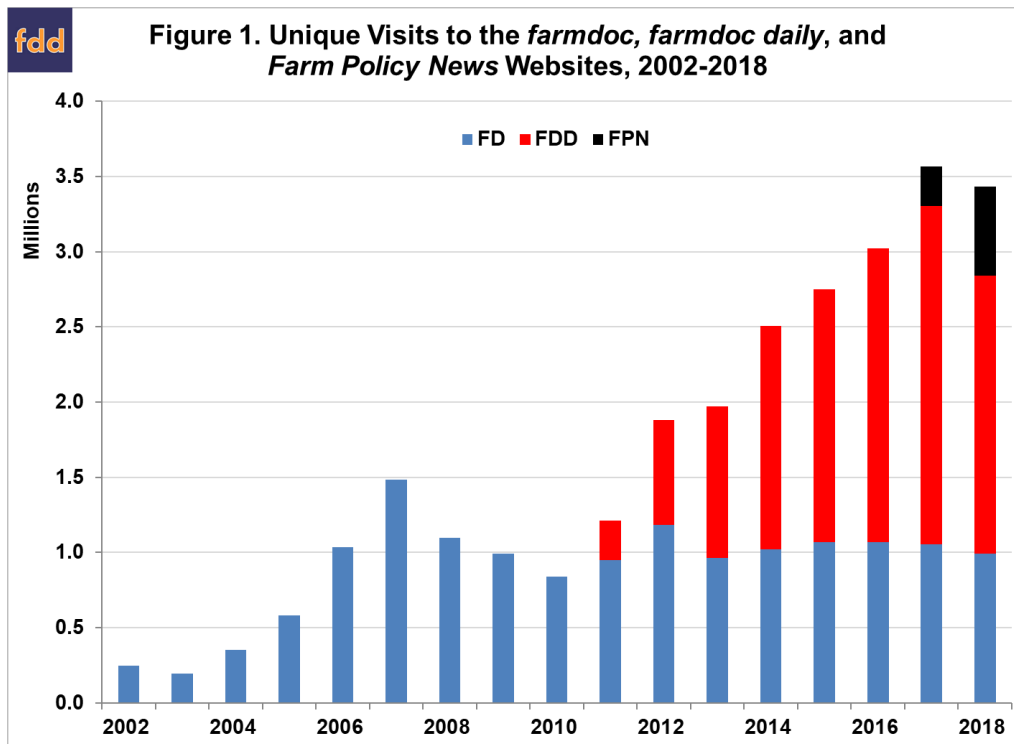


Table 1 is an effort to put usage of *farmdoc* more in the context of traditional Extension programs. Here, “digital contacts” are represented by website page requests and Twitter feed impressions over 2014 through 2018. Measured this way, the project has an astonishing amount of engagement with users, rising from 12 million contacts in 2014 to over 41 million in 2018. Much of this meteoric rise is associated with the increasing role of Twitter as a first point of contact. Finally, it is noteworthy that nearly 16 million page requests were made to the *farmdoc daily* site in 2018. Since daily articles are the only content posted at the site, this means that the vast majority of the page requests are the result of people requesting and (presumably) reading the articles.

Table 1. Digital Contacts for *farmdoc*, 2014 - 2018

Year	Website Page Requests				Twitter Impressions	Total
	<i>farmdoc</i>	<i>farmdoc daily</i>	<i>Farm Policy News</i>	<i>farmbill Toolbox</i>		
2014	5.3	6.1	NA	0.4	0.2	12.0
2015	7.3	11.5	NA	0.2	1.8	20.7
2016	5.3	13.5	0.0	NA	3.6	22.4
2017	5.3	9.5	0.8	NA	9.5	25.1
2018	4.4	15.9	6.6	NA	14.4	41.2

The *farmdoc* project has been fortunate to receive a number of awards and recognitions, and these provide another indicator of impact:

- Distinguished Group Extension Program Award, Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (formerly American Agricultural Economics Association): 2002, 2014, 2016
- Team Award, College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: 2004, 2010, 2013
- Donald A. Holt Achievement Award, Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research: 2008
- Selected as one of two organizations nationwide to develop policy decision tools for implementing the 2014 farm bill
- Team members regularly consulted by government officials regarding a wide variety of policies in agricultural trade, price support, and biofuels
- A team member recently served a term as the agricultural economist on the President's Council of Economic Advisors

In sum, these indicators show that *farmdoc* has become the gold-standard for innovative Extension programs directed towards commercial agriculture. The information found on *farmdoc* websites and social media has earned a place on the “must read” list of farmers, educators, journalists, traders, market analysts, and policy-makers, not only in the U.S., but around the globe.

Lessons Learned

Based on our experience of the last 20 years, we want to offer five lessons that are helpful in understanding why *farmdoc* has been successful.

#1: Talent. Our innovations in the use of digital technology would be interesting but of limited impact without the team of extraordinarily talented individuals that have been the core of *farmdoc* from the start. The team members write the articles, develop the decision tools, and create new datasets. Without this “knowledge power” there is no lasting demand for the output of *farmdoc*.

#2. Shared Vision. The *farmdoc* team coalesced around a well-defined mission from the very beginning. We provide analysis, tools, and data to help commercial farmers in the Corn Belt make better decisions in their operations. Having such a well-defined vision has helped us avoid “mission creep” over the years and from getting pulled in too many directions. It helps that the bulk of team members grew up on farms.

#3. Funding. We were extremely fortunate to receive over \$300,000 in start-up funding from the Strategic Research Initiative for Information Systems and Technology of the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research (CFAR). It is hard to imagine a project like this ever getting off the ground without this funding. The annual budget for the project is now about \$250,000 per year (not accounting for faculty time), and the funding base consists of sponsorships, gift funds, grants, and Extension funds. It hardly needs saying that obtaining funding at this level on a continuing basis is a challenge.

#4. Freedom. We did not realize it at the time, but we were very fortunate to be able to develop a new Extension model without any constraints from formal Extension administration. This allowed us to experiment without worries about repercussions from within the organization. If we failed, and we certainly had our share, we just moved on to try the next idea. Flexibility and quick adaptation in the digital world are absolutely essential.

#5. Low Overhead. From the beginning, we have adopted a decentralized and lean management structure for the project. A key priority is to minimize overhead time costs to team members. This helps maximize flexibility and speed of response to changing issues and problems in Corn Belt agriculture. A good example of this principle in action is the management system for *farmdoc daily*. There is no formal editorial review system for the daily articles. Individual team members are 100 percent responsible for quality control. We maintain a group calendar app and team members sign up for slots and then write the articles. This management philosophy is crucial to making work on *farmdoc* appealing to busy faculty and staff, particularly those that do not have Extension appointments.

Closing Thoughts

The *farmdoc* project has been on quite a ride the last 20 years. Little did we imagine when we developed our first webpage in 1999 that it would be the first step in the development of a digital Extension platform with an audience in the millions. Regardless of where technology takes us in the next 20 years, our core mission will remain the same—providing integrated information and analysis on Corn Belt farm economics. We hope you enjoy this series of articles celebrating the 20th anniversary of *farmdoc*.

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