

SCOUTLINK – A CONSULTANT’S EXPERIENCE WITH A NEW GEO-REFERENCE SCOUTING TOOL

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Abstract

Bayer has developed new software, ScoutLink, for consultants to handle data collection and reporting. Based around the use of a handheld computer and attached global positioning device, the system allows rapid collect and consolidation of the raw data, customizable report creation, and achieves the information in a data base. Beta-testing during the 2001 growing season, indicates that the strengths of the program are that it is easy to use and customize, and allows rapid assimilation of all the data taken by multiple scouts. Weakness uncovered include battery life of the global positioning device tested, concern about the durability of the handheld computer, and the requirement of additional software to run the program. Overall, the program performed well and can be a useful tool for consultants.

Introduction

Bayer has developed ScoutLink software to run on a personal data assistant (PDA or handheld computer) utilizing the Palm operating system. The Handspring Visor was the PDA of choice as a global positioning system module (Geode by GeoDiscovery or GPS Companion by Magellan) can be attached to the Visor and allow the user to record the latitude and longitude of points of interest.

Several consultants across the cotton belt volunteered to beta-test the software and hardware during the 2001 growing season, however due to the late start some consultants were not able to devote much time to testing. Feedback during mid-summer from the consultants that did have time to test the program was positive with many suggestions offered, which led to the second version of the program that was released to the cooperating consultants in November. Testing of the latest changes has been limited but it appears that progress has been made.

Discussion

Impetus for the development of this type of program has resulted from the increase in field information that consultants are needing to record in order to make correct decisions. Compiling, digesting, and reporting this information is difficult and time consuming in a profession where time efficiency is essential. In addition, consultants are liable for the recommendations that they make and thus it is imperative that they document and archive the recommendations and corresponding data that they have provided their clientele. To add value to their services, consultants have also needed a way offer more specific recommendations on a scale smaller than the whole field.

Previously, consultants have relied primarily on hand written data collection and reporting, which has worked well if organized and managed properly. Individually, several consultants have tried to create their own software and hardware toward the same goals as ScoutLink, but many have found the task too difficult for the casual computer user. However, many consultants have been able to incorporate the use of a computer at some stage in the data transfer and therefore have a good working knowledge of what they need and how it might work.

Beta-testing of ScoutLink in 2001 indicated that the scouting software was sound with slight modifications, but the hardware, specifically the Geode GPS module and the mapping aspects of the program were still lacking. The Geode unit had a very short battery life (< 1 days use) and the mapping software was very limited. To address the battery issue, the Magellan GPS module was tested and found to provide much better battery life and power management. Work on the mapping aspects of the program is ongoing, but has a lot of potential.

One of the strengths of the program is that each consultant can customize the variables to be recorded and units they are reported in. As consultants across states and regions use different thresholds for pest management, it was critical that the program be flexible. Durability of the Handspring Visor was similar to current cellular phones and was acceptable for all but work directly in the rain.

The program does require current versions of Microsoft Access and Microsoft Excel, but does not require an extensive knowledge of either to operate. Reports can be customized with the consultants own logo and business name and are easily

generated. Bayer is working with Jtech, Inc (an independent software development company) to continue to refine the program and expand its use to other crops.

Summary

ScoutLink can provide consultants with a powerful data recording, efficient data storage, and rapid reporting. Although there are elements of the software and hardware that need improving and expanding, ScoutLink will be a strong tool for consultants.

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