

# ARA

Retailer of the year

# Keeping Customers First

## Landmark Services Cooperative Wins ARA

To be a winner in the competition to serve farmers requires management “diversity and operational experience.”

The Landmark Services Cooperative agronomy team knows how to differentiate itself through new, innovative and successful programs. In giving credit to the agronomy managers and employees, Jim Shelton, manager of the cooperative’s agronomy services, says these programs come about because “we have a wealth of knowledge that comes to the table with our group.” And for all its successes, Landmark Services Cooperative was named 2007 ARA Retailer of the Year.

The southern Wisconsin-based cooperative has seven agronomy locations providing service to a territory that spreads about 100 miles east and west and 160 miles north and south, crossing into northern Illinois with a service center at Harrison, Ill. The Wisconsin agronomy locations are at Juda, Evansville, Belleville, Cottage Grove, Dane and Rio.



Landmark Cooperative believes in branding including its “NASCAR-look” pickup that Jim Shelton stands near.

Shelton explains that the sales area is split near the middle with flat “glaciated” land on the east and “non-glaciated” rolling land that is “scenic and challenging,” on the west. As would be expected, there are a large number of dairy operations of various sizes throughout the region.

“The board of directors has been very supportive of the direction that Landmark has been going,” Shelton says. Last year the cooperative had total sales of nearly \$250 million with agronomy sales exceeding \$40 million of that total.

### COMBINED VISIONS

Landmark was formed in 2001 from a diverse group of operations. Two of the locations were purchased from Agriliance, two were purchased from Agro (formerly Terra), two were former Union Co-op operations, and three were Cottage Grove Cooperative facilities.

Shelton says, “We had to work hard to get everyone on the same page.” But he quickly adds that having

managers and employees with different philosophies has been a strength and provided vision to the agronomy operations.

Vision has resulted in added services, new facilities and increased sales. Examples are nutrient management planning, full-service precision agricultural options, custom deep fertilizer placement, unit-train liquid fertilizer handling, self-service liquid fertilizer

load-out, customer forward contracting of fertilizers, six seed brands handled in bulk and various package sizes, seed treatment with new seed treatment products and demonstration/education plots.

The agronomy department has more than 100 trucks, including tenders, and operates 40 sprayer/spreader applicators. The application fleet has been steadily upgraded with new variable rate technology/precision ag electronics. Also, a total of 15 semi trucks, not specific for use by the agronomy department, are owned by the cooperative and scheduled by the cooperative’s logistics group.

“Each manager comes from a background that recognizes the need for the cooperative to be a leader and profitable,” says Gregg Langer, agronomy sales manager and crop protection coordinator.

The emphasis by the agronomy employees is “how can we be better than the competition,” says Kevin Knudtson, agronomy operations manager for the southern half of the cooperative’s trade territory, Juda agronomy plant manager and coordinator for strip-till custom services.

Services and product offerings are well conceived because of long-range planning. “We don’t shoot from the hip like some operations seem to do,” says Scott Smith, Evansville plant manager and cooperative plant food coordinator.

Another key manager is Josh Lundy, who manages the northern half of the sales region, manages the Cottage Grove plant and is seed solutions coordinator for the cooperative. Other agronomy plant managers are Steve McElroy,



# Retailer of the Year

By Richard Keller, editor

Dane and Rio; Jeff Kopp, Belleville; and Denny Morris, Harrison. A recent addition to aid in seed sales is Lee Jennings, seed solutions specialist.

## MANY REASONS FOR AWARD

There are numerous reasons that the cooperative won the ARA award, but much of it comes back to Shelton. He came to the cooperative with nearly 30 years of experience having grown up around his family's ag retail operations at Juda and Harrison, which were sold to Cenex/Land O'Lakes and are now part of Landmark Cooperative.

Precision ag is playing a big part in the cooperative's sales. Some ag retailers jumped into precision and "then drifted away, but we stayed with it," says Shelton. Many of those who drifted away are trying to catch up now because of the high cost of fertilizer, he says. Variable rate application is extremely important. As an example, he notes that "60 percent of the lime was being put in the wrong place until we started variable rate application using precision ag."

Landmark Cooperative is a participant in the High Q precision ag program. Farmers store field data in laptop computers, and yield monitor data is accumulated at harvest. Data such as tillage, crop protection applications, seed varieties and yields are compared with grid soil test results. This raw data is turned into useable information. "We can do a computer query of what worked best on a customer's farm, compared to his neighbor's or across the region," Shelton explains. Landmark customer data can be compared

with other High Q affiliated customers in the "River Bend Community," which includes parts of Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa. Loyal Landmark customers can see what has worked best for unidentified growers using similar farming systems across a wide geography.

The cooperative has two precision ag specialists "that I'd put up against any other ag retail precision ag specialists in the country," Shelton says. There are four additional support staff that compose the precision ag team.

Bringing agronomy solutions to area growers is Landmark's Agronomy Production Specialist (APS) team. Landmark has 20 APSs that work with area growers to move them to the next level in crop production.

## LEADER IN SERVICES

"Our staff doesn't feel comfortable making a recommendation with conventional soil-sampling methods. It doesn't make sense to not use GPS technology for the growers' bottom line," says Knudtson.

"Increased interest in no-till has brought on demand for strip-till services," he says, and the cooperative has two strip-till deep placement fertilizer banding rigs. This service could not be done efficiently if it wasn't for auto-steer systems on the tractors, Knudtson says.

The cooperative's UAN business continues to grow replacing anhydrous ammonia sales. "UAN with the addition of ATS has shown a yield increase over ammonia, and split applications between pre-plant and sidedress have shown even better," says Smith.

The UAN fertilizer load-out facility at Evansville has four bays, two of which are self-service allowing customers to use a keycard for computer-controlled liquid fertilizer mixing and loading 24 hours a day. Two million-gallon liquid fertilizer tanks store product.

A few of the Landmark agronomy management group was assembled for this photograph. They are (left to right) Kevin Knudtson, Scott Smith, Jim Shelton, Gregg Langer and Lee Jennings.

"Granted, ammonia is the cheapest, but we have been able to show growers that UAN delivers the yield," he says.

The seed business, with all of the biotech crop protection traits, has impacted pesticide sales but is a replacement profit center for the cooperative. Seed sales have doubled every two years since Landmark was founded. Seed delivery efficiency and convenience for the grower has played a part. Semi-load pallets and mini-cubes of seed are forklift dropped into growers' sheds, and tenders deliver bulk seed.

Seed treatment is a growing profit center as the cooperative is doing more and more fungicide, inoculants and traditional seed treating. In 2007, the cooperative coordinated with Wolfrax for coating seed with micronutrients. "It was the first year for putting manganese and zinc on the soybean seed using equipment the same as what puts sugar on Cheerios," Smith says.

"We try to keep our growers a step ahead of other growers," says Langer. Indications are that they are being successful. **AG**