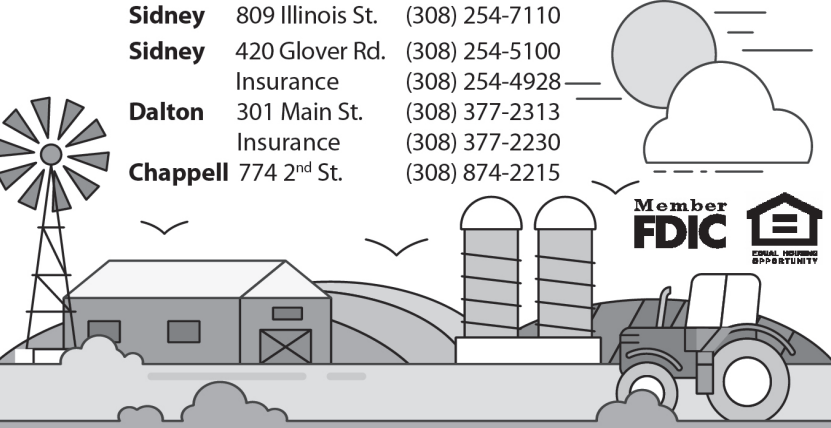



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TECHNOLOGY

CONTINUED FROM 9

grown along with the size of farms. Today's farmer produces more product than ever before to meet the needs of today's world. In 1900, the average farmer fed 12 people with his product. In 2012, United State Department of Agriculture figures showed the average farmer fed 160 people worldwide.

Through that time frame, farm size has grown while the number of farms has gone down. It is now estimated that less than two percent of the U.S. population is engaged in production farming, with just more than 2.1 million farms in the United States.

But equipment size isn't the only thing that has changed in farm production. To meet increased demands, technology has also played a big part in helping operators become more efficient.

That's where "Sputnik" comes in. While that 1959 satellite did little more than orbit the earth, it paved the way to today's era of satellite-aided tools used by virtually every segment of the world's population.

Not only can today's tractors pull more, but they can do it without excessive waste, thanks to the use of satellite technology. Many of today's tractors, combines and other equipment can use satellite and computer technology to increase efficiency.

Joel Ahrens of 21st Century Equipment in Sidney says the combination of satellite location equipment, coupled with computer programs, can help farmers make critical adjustments to their operation. Monitors on combines give constant information on crop yields. Thanks to satellite technology, machines with the right equipment can map where the best yields came from and which parts of the field can be lacking.

Using that data in combination

with other information gained through soil testing and other observations, farmers so equipped can develop computer programs that will automatically make adjustments to seeding rates, the amounts of fertilizers or other chemicals needed, even the amount of irrigation applied by center pivot systems.

"It provides for better efficiency and less waste," Ahrens said.

Ahrens said satellite technology also reduces wear and tear on the farmer himself. Tractors equipped with GPS guidance drive straighter with less overlap, covering ground more efficiently. But even more importantly, said Ahrens, "there's not as much fatigue for the operator."

While self-driving cars have been big news for years, the same types of experiments are also taking place in the ag sector. One of the more successful experiments has been with autonomous grain carts, which farmers use to help collect and transport crops harvested in the field.

Currently, grain carts are pulled behind tractors with human operators. Combines unload without stopping in the field, then the operator takes the grain to waiting trucks for transport to storage facilities. With the autonomous rig, it is parked, or "staged" in the field. When the combine passes, the technology-controlled rig moves into position to empty the combine, then drives to a pre-designated spot for unloading.

"Someone still has to drive it to the field and then unload it, but it can free someone up for other things," Ahrens said.

Time will tell what changes may improve farming over the next 100 years. But if the changes are as great as those in the past, no one has likely even imagined the innovations yet to come.