

# AG AV CAREERS SECTION

## THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN AG PILOT

*By Lindsay Byrne, NAAA Director of Communications*

**B**eing an ag pilot is one of the most exciting jobs in aviation. It requires tremendous skill and precision. Who knows? If you enjoy aviation video games or enjoy the outdoors and rural living, you may be a perfect addition to the agricultural aviation industry. It's a challenging job that takes a significant amount of training, and the hours during the busy flying season can be long; but it can be a fulfilling job. Ag pilots provide an essential service to farmers, foresters and the public at large. Ag pilots love their ability to soar through the skies in beautiful and serene farm and forestry country. In many areas across the country, it is also a seasonal job, which can allow for other leisure or professional opportunities in the off season.

### **The Benefits Of Being An Ag Pilot: Pride In Job**

Aerial application is extremely important in treating fields that are too wet for ground rigs, as well as applying products to crops when the crop canopies, such as orchards or mid to late stage corn, are too thick for ground rigs. An airplane or helicopter can accomplish three times the amount of work in a day than ground equipment or any other form of application. This means less fuel used, less air pollution and no soil compaction. Also, ag aviation assists in providing a safe, affordable and abundant supply of food, fiber and bio-fuel for the world's growing population. It is also vital in protecting our natural resources and combating pests that threaten public health, such as West Nile Virus-carrying mosquitoes. Aerial application also protects forestry from pests and fires.

To produce future food, fiber and bio-fuels and leave room for wildlife we must increase production on the land we are now using. High-yield agriculture benefits the environment by producing maximum crop yields from fewer acres. Aerial application is a critical component of high-yield agriculture. For example, corn fungicide applications assist to produce more corn for use as food and/or bio-fuel. Corn fungicide applications begin during the tasseling,

or pollinating, stage of the corn. The use of fungicides, as well as fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides has helped to increase yields by large amounts over the past several years during the later stage of production, which allows more people and animals to be fed, clothes to be made and bio-fuels to be produced.

One of the benefits about working in this industry is that ag pilots can travel all over the country to work. For example, while one area of the country's agricultural economy may be struggling from a drought or natural disaster, another area of the country might be experiencing a bumper crop where more aerial applicators may be needed to work. It is not uncommon for aerial applicators to travel to where there is work during the different seasons. This was seen last year—while the Southeast area of the country was in a drought, the Midwest had an abundance of work due to the high amount of corn planted and needed fungicide applications. Several southern ag pilots were able to travel to the Midwest to help other pilots.

Without aerial application, it would be impossible for U.S. farmers to grow today's yields from shrinking farmlands. Today there are 6.6 billion people populating the planet, but it is estimated there will be just over 9 billion by 2050. World food needs will substantially increase, but land area suitable for farming is not increasing. With the world's growing demands, aerial applicators will be needed to continue to assist agriculture with modern farming practices for the foreseeable future.

### **The Benefits Of Being An Ag Pilot: Necessity Of Agriculture**

As stated earlier, with the increase in the world's population, food, fiber and bio-fuel production will need to double around mid-Century to meet this demand. The growth rate of available agricultural land to farm comes nowhere close to the rate of food demand. As the chart on the next page from USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) indicates, there has been, and probably will continue to be, large economic growth in China and India. As a result of this economic

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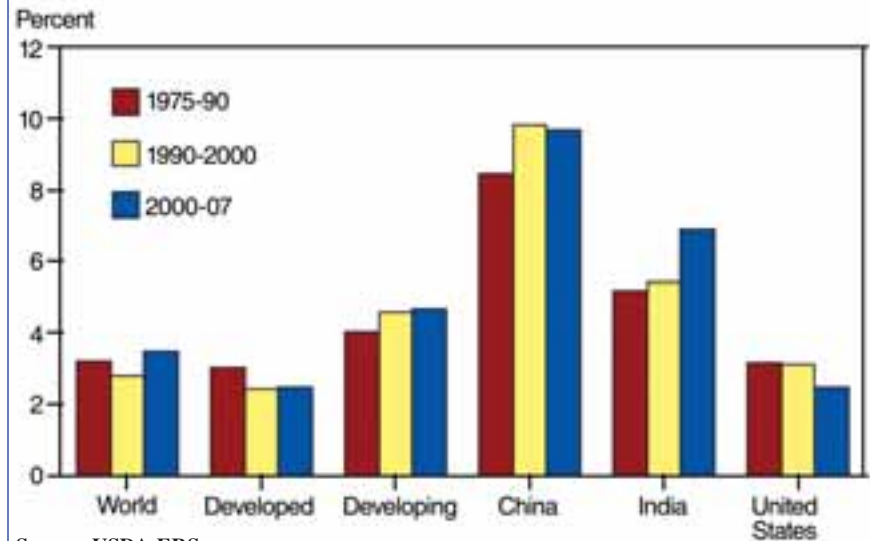
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growth both countries have a stronger, growing middle class, which allows them to spend more money on food. The rapid economic growth of these two countries, which make up nearly 40 percent of the world's population, has provided a powerful demand for agricultural products, especially beef. As the demand for meat rises, the demand for grain and protein feeds used to produce the meat rises because it takes eight pounds of grain to make one pound of beef. As these countries and the world's economies grow, more food will be needed to feed the growing population. According to the USDA, the growth rate for global area harvested has averaged only about 0.15 percent per year during the last 38 years. This rate is not expected to change dramatically. As a result, demand for modern agricultural practices to maximize yields will increase. This benefits aerial application because aerial application is a vital component in high-yield agriculture in quickly and effectively treating crops in conditions where other methods of applications cannot.

his aspirations to become an aerial firefighter. Morse stated, "I wanted to fly heavy tankers or SEATs (Single Engine Air Tankers) and had no knowledge of the ag aviation industry. Once I started learning more about firebombing, I learned more about ag aviation and it became more appealing to me than fire fighting. Although my original intent was to fight fire, my long term goals have shifted from fire to ag because I learned so many great things about the industry."

When asked about the benefits of being an ag pilot, Morse stated, "First of all, it is definitely a lifestyle, not just a job and it helps to have a very supportive family. You don't always get holidays and you don't know how long you'll be at work, but there is a huge satisfaction to working in this industry. I love being an ag pilot; it's fun, hands on and exciting. I feel like I'm accomplishing something and helping a greater cause than just flying other types of aircraft. I also get to come home and sleep every night, which doesn't happen when you're a fire bomber or work for an airline.

## Economic Growth



Source: USDA-ERS

## The Benefits Of Being An Ag Pilot: Testimonials

Gavin Morse, a 24 year old ag pilot, works for Royal Flying Service in Quincy, WA, and did not grow up in the agriculture or aerial application industry. His interest in the ag pilot profession was prompted by

Although I don't get to see my wife a lot during our busy season, the off season is a great opportunity to travel, visit family for extended periods of time and do hobbies, like ride my dirt bike. Because I have an entrepreneurial personality, this industry appeals to me because I know that I can one day

own my own operation and control what I'm doing. It's a great industry to be a part of."

Eric Klindt, 33 years old, is a pilot for Tri-State Air Ag in Cambell, MN and did not grow up in the aerial application industry, but he did grow up on a farm. He did some work as a farm hand and was introduced to aerial application. "I was intrigued with aerial application after working on the farm and when I pursued my degree at the University of Minnesota, Crookston, I found that they had a degree in agriculture focusing on aerial application; therefore, I made the decision to undertake their Bachelor's Degree program. After I graduated, I was hired by Tri-State Air Ag. I also enjoy working with farmers and I wanted to continue that in some way in my future, but I was not interested in working as a crop consultant full time."

Klindt stated, "When thinking about my future when I was younger, I wanted to do something that included 'spur of the moment' work and not knowing what was going to happen the next day. I looked at becoming a fire fighter or EMT, but I decided on aerial application because the industry is often 'spur of the moment' and I can work with farmers and fly. It is an exciting profession and one where you receive great financial rewards for doing a lot of work. I am really busy during the summer, but once the season slows down, I can pick up the other things that I enjoy doing, such as driving a truck and managing my small limousine company. Both of these things can be put aside during the spray season and picked up again without any issue. This industry allows me to fulfill my interests and reap the financial rewards."

When asked about running his own business, Klindt stated that the aerial application industry is one where you can own a business if you see that in your future. He has chosen not to own an operation right now because he doesn't want to carry the risk that a business owner has. He also stated that he's had the opportunity to manage the business, which

has been a great experience for learning how the business operates, which will help him determine whether or not he wants to own an aerial application business in the future. Klindt recommends that people interested in the industry work for an operation to learn every aspect of the business, not just flying.

Marty Owen, 43 years old, is a pilot for Desert Air Ag in Terreton, ID and he grew up in rural areas and has been involved in agriculture most of his life. He started out in the industry doing mixing and loading of ag aircraft, as well as basic aircraft maintenance for Leif Isaacson, the operator of Desert Air Ag. After receiving his private and commercial pilot's license, Owen began flying ag. "I decided that agricultural aviation was a good way to combine agriculture and aviation, two things that I really enjoy. I was also never in the position to own my farm, but now I can fly over and treat everyone else's farms."

Owen stated, "I am involved in this industry because I feel like I am contributing something to life and society. In this country, we have the best, most safe and most abundant food supply and part of that is because of the work that ag pilots' conduct. We work hard to contribute to the U.S. food supply, just as the farmers and everyone else involved in agriculture and food safety do. At times this industry can also allow ag pilots to enjoy their hobbies, such as snowmobiling and snowboarding, but I can also work in other states during our downtime or stay put in my home state."

### Want More Information?

If you're interested in becoming an ag pilot, the NAAA offers a program called *Compaass* Rose, which are educational sessions led by veteran ag pilots introducing potential recruits into the world of aerial application. These sessions take place at state/regional association conventions, as well as the NAAA Annual Convention in December. More information on *Compaass* Rose and the agricultural aviation industry may be found at [www.agaviation.org](http://www.agaviation.org). ✈



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