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## Van Horn helps farmers get most out of the field

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**CERRO GORDO** - In 37 years working for Van Horn, Inc., Roger Oliver has seen the agriculture industry undergo many changes.

Yields continue to improve due to enhanced technology in everything from the machines farmers use to the seed that goes into the ground, Oliver said. With the improvements being made, Oliver expects that 200-bushel-per-acre yields for corn soon will be common.

"Technology in the seed selling today is far and away the biggest improvement," said Oliver, the company's president.

Van Horn's goal, as it has been for 75 years, is to give its customers the best and most cost-effective technology available in the products it sells, Oliver said. It has a line of products that includes corn and soybean seeds, insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers and liquid nitrogen.

"We feel good that what we do is the most cost-effective to raise a good crop, and the crop is profitable for the farmer," Oliver said.

The company started in 1934 as a family-owned business near Cerro Gordo. The Van Horn family sold the business in 1974, and it has been entirely employee-owned since then. Employee-owned companies such as Van Horn are rare in the industry, Oliver said.



Herald & Review photos/Kelly J. Huff  
Roger Oliver, president of Van Horn Inc., checks the progress on an ear of corn near the company's Cerro Gordo headquarters.

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The focus of the company is to provide services locally, with the heaviest target base within a 15-mile radius of each plant, Oliver said.

For farmers, the rural neighborhoodlike locations make it easy to find what they need.

"It's only five miles away from my house, so it's convenient," said farmer Mat Muirheid, who lives in nearby Oakley Township. "If I have a part broken or if I run out of something and need extra, I can run over there and get it."

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Saving on input costs is crucial for farmers' bottom lines.

"Everything's going up," Muirheid said. "That's why we spend time in the winter looking at budgets. You can never stick to a budget 100 percent. It's like owning a house. You don't know when your washer and dryer is going to go out. You hope it lasts, but you don't know."

Buying in larger quantities helps, Muirheid said. Oliver also said the technology improvements can help farmers control how much product, like fertilizer, is applied in each field.

"Fertilizer can be applied more efficiently with the right placement and a more targeted application," Oliver said.

Muirheid said he and his dad, George, don't have the mapping capability yet to vary rates within the same field, but the rate at which they apply fertilizer can change from field to field.

Van Horn depends on loyal customers such as the Muirheids as the number of farmers dwindles. Its customer service sets it apart, Oliver said.

Test plots in fields just to the north of the Cerro Gordo plant give the company visibility for Farm Progress Show visitors coming on a main artery from the east on Illinois 32. The plots allow for Van Horn employees to see how the different seed varieties perform and base their recommendations partially on that first-hand knowledge.

As Van Horn moves toward its next major anniversary, Oliver expects the challenge will be how well bigger machinery is able to cover more acres. Farms are increasing in size, he said.

"Nobody knows what direction it's going to go," Oliver said. "It's changed so much in the 30-plus years I've been here."

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## FOOD DRIVE

Van Horn Inc. is holding a food drive through the end of September. Collection bins will be placed at each of its seven locations.

The food collected will benefit local food pantries to help fill their shelves.

The company plans on making a \$2,000 match for the food collected.

Herald & Review photos/Kelly J. Huff

Tom Tohill, a 33-year Van Horn employee, monitors the filling of a truck with herbicide.



Herald & Review photos/Kelly J. Huff

Mike Comerford, a Van Horn employee for 31 years, fills portable tanks with anhydrous ammonia.