

UPGRADE VS. REPAIRS

WHEN IS BUYING A NEW CORN HEAD MORE COST-EFFECTIVE THAN REPAIRING AN OLD ONE?

For many producers, optimizing the performance of their combine is considered key to corn harvest efficiency, but today we know corn head performance is equally as critical.

"Twenty years ago, it was not unusual to see the same corn head run through two or three different combines," says Iowa farmer and Dragotec President, Denny Bollig. "But now with enhanced genetics, tougher stalks, added acres and more plant material running through the corn head, that trend has changed.

"Upgrading your combine doesn't change the fact that 60% of yield loss occurs at the corn head," says Bollig. "It's crucial that your corn head performs to its full potential to limit loss and maximize return."

EVALUATE YOUR CORN HEAD

The condition of components that may determine the need to replace the corn head itself starts with the corn head's drive system.

"Inevitably, as chains, sprockets and gears wear, drive system components lose efficiency," Bollig says. "If chains and sprockets are worn, you may need to evaluate the cost of their replacement – or risk the chance of an untimely breakdown.



"Consider a corn head that's totally gear-driven – and even how those gears mesh," he advises. "Spiral-cut gears, for example, have significantly less wear and eliminate common maintenance issues compared to straight-cut gears common in most corn heads."

He says producers must use their discretion when weighing the cost of repairs versus replacement.

"When making a decision about replacing parts, ask yourself, 'What is it going to cost me?' and do not always think about the cost of the part itself," Bollig advises. "Consider the job it will do and if it will last the season."

Another critical component for evaluating the life of a corn head are its gearboxes.

“Gearboxes are at the heart of any corn head, and their wear can be a great indicator of its longevity,” says Bollig. “Producers might consider replacing their corn head when its row unit gearboxes begin to fail or when there is excessive backlash movement of rotating shafts and sprockets.”

IMPROVING RELIABILITY

“In many cases, producers will purchase a new corn head because they changed planters – they may have changed row spacing or added more rows, for example. Or they may want a chopping head to save trips across the field,” Bollig says.

“But the most common reasons for replacing a corn head include improving reliability, increasing capacity and minimizing cost.

“As a corn head ages, producers must evaluate its wear, increasing maintenance, cost of replacement parts and potential downtime at harvest,” Bollig says. “Sometimes, you can use lower-cost parts, but they may give you more headaches at harvest through breakdowns that can end up costing you more money.”

MUST CONSIDER ROI

Yet another reason producers upgrade their corn head is simply to gain harvest efficiency.

“The problem is most corn head brands are designed the same way they were 30 years ago,” says Bollig. “The mechanics are basically the same, only now we are driving higher-horsepower machines faster and harvesting more plants per acre with tougher stalks, and it’s creating more wear issues than in the past.

“Farmers with sharp pencils are looking more closely at equipment durability and how machines are built as a way to manage costs without losing yield.

“Most producers buy the same corn head brand they had before without considering what else may be better. A new corn head doesn’t mean you get anything different, technology wise, from what they had.

“It pays to compare.” Bollig notes that Drago, for example, offers significant upgrades in both harvest efficiency and durability when compared to other brands.

THE MORE PROTECTION, THE BETTER

“If you look at what’s happening at the corn head during harvest, it’s a brutal action. And now, with more plants per acre and tougher stalks, it’s creating more wear on the corn head,” Bollig adds. “It’s important to consider slip clutch systems that protect individual components, such as gathering chains, knife rollers and choppers, so that the machine is as durable as possible.”

One way to protect those components and improve the durability is by limiting torque. “Most corn heads have a single slip clutch for all components. That means the torque load is set for the highest load, which leaves the other components less protected. The Drago GT, by comparison, has a slip clutch for each individual component with the torque set to protect each component,” Bollig says. “This extends the life of those components by applying the right amount of protection for that specific component’s job.”

AN AFFORDABLE UPGRADE

“When you are buying a corn head, you must consider its return on investment. The longer that equipment can run before it needs to be rebuilt or replaced, the better. It’s a big factor in calculating ROI,” he says.

Whether purchasing new or used, corn head upgrades can be an affordable alternative to improving combine performance. “Gaining harvest efficiency and capturing more yield doesn’t have to mean replacing the largest, most expensive machine in your harvest equipment lineup.”

