THE EARFULL
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RENK • SEED

Late-Season Clues, Next-Season Answers

By late August, the crop is beginning to show us what is working and what did not. The challenge is that many of those clues become harder to interpret once leaves dry down, equipment starts running, and harvest activity takes over.

This week is a good time to move beyond the simple question, "How good does this field look?" Instead, start asking: "What is causing field variability, and what can these differences teach us before next spring?"

Corn: Capture the Patterns Now

In corn, the differences are often becoming easier to see. A field may appear uniform from the road while still containing distinct zones with shorter plants, lower ear placement, early dry-down, weaker color, or visibly thinner stands.

Those patterns rarely happen by accident. They can point back to soil texture, compaction, drainage, residue distribution, planting conditions, uneven emergence, nutrient availability, or rainfall timing.

This is not the week to build another yield estimate. The better use of time is to identify the zones worth explaining after harvest.

A few simple actions can pay off:

- Drop pins or take geotagged photos of areas that are finishing early or under stress.
- Note recurring headland, sidehill, sand ridge, or low ground patterns.
- Flag fields where a strong-looking crop changes sharply within a short distance.
- Identify whether weaker areas match old drainage issues, traffic patterns, or known soil changes.
- Save drone imagery or field photos before maturity makes the entire field look similar.

The goal is to give harvest data some context. A low-yield area is much more useful when it is accompanied by field observations.

Soybeans: Watch for Uneven Finish

Soybeans often hide variability until later in the season. By now, differences in canopy height, maturity, pod load, weed pressure, and green stem risk can help separate a one-time issue from a repeatable field pattern.

Pay attention to fields where maturity is noticeably uneven. Some variation is expected, but broad or recurring zones can reveal more about the field than a whole-field average ever will.

Look for places where:

- Plants are shorter or thinner in a consistent pattern.
- Weed escapes line up with weak canopy development.
- Wet areas remain green longer than surrounding acres.
- Early-maturing areas follow lighter soils or shallow ground.
- Lodging risk or uneven drydown may affect harvest timing.

A quick note now can prevent a lot of guessing later. When yield maps are available, those notes help distinguish whether a poor zone was driven by weather, soil, traffic, drainage, population, or another manageable factor.

Make Harvest Data Better

Yield maps are only as valuable as the data going into them. Before harvest begins, take a few minutes to make sure monitors are calibrated, field boundaries are correct, and operators know where to pause or flag unusual conditions.

Clean yield data can become a strong decision tool when it is compared across years. Repeated low-yield areas deserve a different conversation than areas that only struggle in a dry year, wet year, or under a specific crop.

This fall, focus on building a short list of questions—not a long list of assumptions:

- Which zones perform well consistently?
- Which zones are consistently below the field average?
- Which areas are variable depending on weather?
- Where should soil sampling, drainage review, compaction checks, or population decisions begin?
- Which fields deserve an on-farm trial in 2027?

References

- USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Crop Progress, August 3, 2026.
- North Dakota State University Extension, Site-Specific Farming: Yield Mapping and Use of Yield Map Data.
- Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Plan Ahead to Minimize Soil Compaction During Harvest