

Business Record

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Agren Inc.

The Business Record continues its look at companies ignited by a desire to solve business inefficiencies.

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■ **ESTABLISHED:** 1996

■ **OWNERS:** Tom Buman, Stan Buman and Jamie Ridgely

■ **LOCATION:** 1238 Heires Ave., Carroll

■ **WEBSITE:** www.agreninc.com

THE PROBLEM:

When it comes to building a conservation project such as a pond or wetland, surveying the area and coming up with an accurate estimate can take days, weeks or even months. It normally requires sending a surveyor to the site to take measurements of all the critical elevation points.

WHAT'S YOUR KEY TO BEING INNOVATIVE?



PHOTO SUBMITTED

THE INNOVATION:

The state of Iowa used a program called LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) to take elevation readings across the state, but that program is not very manageable or easy to use. Agren Inc. developed software that could easily read the LiDAR data and show landowners exactly where and how they could build a conservation project – and give a cost estimate that is 90 to 95 percent accurate – in a matter of minutes.

HOW THEY DID IT:

Agren started out as a consulting firm dedicated to helping people who worked in agriculture find profitable solutions to environmental challenges.

The founders had always envisioned that if a high-quality elevation tool such as LiDAR existed, Agren could build the software to utilize the data. That day came in the mid-2000s, when Agren found out that the state was purchasing LiDAR technology.

"It was just really a coincidental time because I had told (co-owner Stan Buman), 'If we just had high-elevation data, we could develop software that would kind of formalize and really enhance what field offices are doing by hand,'" co-owner Tom Buman said. "Stan came in one day and said, 'You got your wish.'"

Taking the publicly available data, Agren developed its PondBuilder and BasinBuilder software. The software is easy to use and has the ability to quickly show a landowner exactly where a pond, for example, can be built. Landowners can see different options of how the pond can be built in terms of square feet, depth and price.

Agren then worked with the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) to license the product to soil and water conservation districts around Iowa. The software is now licensed to 59 cen-

ters statewide, which use it to give quick information to landowners hoping to build a conservation project.

In the process, Agren has gone from being strictly a consulting company to now licensing a product. That provided some challenges, such as finding a programmer who could help develop the software and getting the funding to develop a new part of the business, which took grants from the state.

The easy part, though, was working with IDALS to get the software utilized in its centers. Agren's next goal is to try to license the software to other states, and maybe even the private sector. So far, the company has had a harder time gaining traction outside Iowa with agencies that don't understand the software as well.

Still, the products have become a fundamental part of the business, and Agren's owners see it as a great opportunity moving forward. In addition to the initial software, Agren now has WetlandBuilder and WaterwayBuilder programs.

"We really can make a difference in how conservation planning is done and how conservation information is delivered to farmers and landowners," Tom Buman said.

Added Stan Buman: "It just helps get conservation on the ground faster."

– Kyle Oppenhuizen

"I think that our best innovative products are where we've taken the LiDAR that people are using under traditional ways, and we've taken some of the new (geographic information system) processes, and we've merged those two ideas together. I think our **best ideas** have always come where we've taken two different ideas that were never **merged together**, and we merge those together. I think that's really what has made this project innovative. "

– Tom Buman
co-founder, Agren Inc.