



AT-502B

PILOT

REPORT

You might not know it, but Weld County Colorado is the fifth highest agricultural producing county in the United States, based on the market value of products sold. The farmers in this northern region of Colorado produce an abundant supply of everything from wheat and corn to carrots and cucumbers. This fact is especially interesting considering the relatively short growing season in this part of the country, small average field sizes and an irrigation system that brings water from mountains up to 120 miles away.

Because of these unique conditions, ag sprayers in Colorado operate differently than others in the United States. Fieldmen inspect for insect or other damage, then advise the farmers when it's time to spray. Having expert fieldmen and the best aircraft are vital elements to the success of an ag operation and Dana Gustafson, owner of Crop Air, Inc. in Eaton, Colorado, feels fortunate that he has both.

Crop Air employs Ralph Turvey, widely recognized as the best fieldman in the area, to handle the majority of their field work. Dana Gustafson also does some field inspecting, but concentrates primarily on flying his new Air Tractor AT-502B. Between these two valuable assets, Gustafson is able to run a highly successful ag operation...while spraying a mere 50,000-60,000 acres a year during an average spray season that runs only from May 15 through August 15.

"The average field size we spray is 20 acres, and a lot of our work is 20 to 30 miles away," said Gustafson. "We had been operating with Eagle aircraft for several years, but the planes were very slow in both spraying and ferry time. The difference I'm seeing with the turbine 502B is amazing."

"The 500-gallon hopper allows us to spray several fields with one load, versus making several trips with the Eagles," continued Gustafson. "And with the faster ferry speed, we save a lot of time getting to - and coming home

from - the fields we spray. Even though the wing is longer on the Eagle, the speed of the Air Tractor and the ease of controls make it the better plane by far."

Crop Air still owns four Eagles, a wooden-winged plane that was manufactured in Minnesota until the firm went out of business during the early 1980's. The new AT-502B has significantly reduced the workload of the Eagles.

"The Air Tractor has eliminated the need to use all of our planes, except during peak days of the spray season," explained Gustafson. "The turbine engine is a lot less expensive to maintain than the flat engines on the Eagles, so our costs have gone down while our productivity has increased. Now we can utilize the Eagles for closer work, which they're much better suited for, and let the Air Tractor handle all the long ferry jobs."

In addition to Gustafson and Turvey, other members of the professional team at Crop Air include pilot, mechanic and fieldman Jerry Thompson, loader and fieldman Rick Rosenoff, loader Jace Gustafson (Dana's younger brother), and 76-year old Dennis Gustafson, Dana's father who retired in 1979 and came to work for Crop Air. Dennis takes care of fueling the aircraft and other tasks. Dana's mother, Jean, ran the office for nine years until 1988, when his wife, Elaine, took over as office manager and bookkeeper. All of the Crop Air pilots and fieldmen are well known for their superior levels of knowledge, but as previously noted, Ralph Turvey is considered the best in the business.

Farmers in Weld County must rent bee hives during the growing season. In order to avoid crooked cucumbers, each plant must be pollinated at least 3 times. Fieldmen are important components of this process, since they warn beekeepers before they spray a field so that the bees can be locked up. Coordination and timing are vital aspects of a fieldman's job in Colorado.

Making the switch from his Eagles to an Air Tractor was not a snap decision for Dana Gustafson. He needed a plane that could lift off at Eaton's 4,800-foot altitude fully loaded, yet within the confines of his 2,600-foot paved runway. Many planes would have trouble accomplishing this, but not the Air Tractor. What finally swayed Gustafson to purchase the 502B turbine was observing a competitor.

"A friendly competitor about 45 miles from me operates two Air Tractors, and I watched his operation very closely for a couple of years," said Gustafson. "I finally realized he would finish his spraying by mid-morning, while we were working well past noon in the Eagles."

The Crop Air pilots did a significant amount of boom testing on the new Air Tractor to get the best possible coverage. Currently, they have the boom set at 57-percent of the 502B's 52-foot wingspan.

"For 2-gallon work we'll work at 75-foot swath widths, and 65-foot widths for 5 gallon work," explained Gustafson. "We've also found that we get better coverage flying four to five feet above the crops."

"At first, our farmers were a bit concerned with the increased speed of the Air Tractor, but now they're very impressed with the way our spray fogs out of the boom," continued Gustafson. "In fact, some of them thought we were spraying five gallons per acre instead of two because of the 502B's great spray pattern."

Since they spray so many small fields, the Crop Air professionals utilize GPS on their aircraft to assure the utmost in accuracy. After the day's spraying is completed, Crop Air fieldmen go out and check fields that need spraying. Their information is compiled and turned in to Dana, who fills out a load sheet for each pilot for the next day's work. Crop Air's specialized computer software generates a form with instructions on what particular mix to use, which is given to the loaders.

"The combination of the GPS and our computer system enables Crop Air employees to work better as a team, which in turn allows us to further increase overall productivity," said Gustafson.

The agriculture industry in Colorado is different than any other place in the country. Despite harsh winters, short growing seasons and small fields, area farmers produce an enormous amount of product.

With his talented fieldmen and the productivity of his Air Tractor AT-502B, Dana Gustafson and the team at Crop Air, Inc. are proudly helping maintain Weld County's dominance in the ag industry.

- 1 Ralph Turvey performs a field inspection for one of Crop Air's customers.
- 2 Ralph Turvey, left, and Ken Roberts, regional manager for Agtrol Chemical Products, discuss treatment for an onion virus.
- 3 Loader Jace Gustafson prepares one of the Eagles for takeoff.
- 4 Family patriarch Dennis Gustafson refuels one of Crop Air's Eagle Aircraft.
- 5 Rick Rosenoff handles much of the mixing for Crop Air.
- 6 Making sure the office runs smoothly is Dana Gustafson's wife, Elaine.
- 7 Dana Gustafson knows his operation has the best fieldmen and ag aircraft in the business.
- 8 Crop Air customer Harvey Spade goes over a work order with Dana Gustafson.





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The Crop Air, Inc. team. L-r: Jerry Thompson, Rick Rosenoff, Jack Gustafson, Ralph Turvey, Dana Gustafson, Elaine Gustafson.