

# The effect of nearly 27 years of service to Manitoba's agriculture industry

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## Abstract

For 26 years, 11 months, and eight days, John Heard was “at your service” as the provincial soil fertility specialist for Manitoba Agriculture, Manitoba Agriculture and Food, Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Manitoba Agriculture and Resource Development, and coming full circle, Manitoba Agriculture, yet again. Over the course of his career, John went above and beyond expectations, providing technical advice rooted in strong science, with a level of energy that went unmatched, despite efforts made by colleagues to keep up!

## Objectives

- To examine the effect of extending “proven” techniques for soil fertility management to Manitoba producers.
- To quantify the impact of good agronomic practices through on-farm research and demonstration projects.
- To provide guidance and advice to Manitoba agronomists.

## Method/Materials

John Heard's passion for agriculture was first developed as a young boy, having been raised on a farm near London, Ontario. To carry out this long-term project, John first obtained a B.Sc. at the University of Guelph in 1983, followed by an M.Sc. from Purdue University in 1985. After graduation, John returned to Ontario to work for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food at the New Liskeard College of Agricultural Technology in Thunder Bay (2023 communication from M. Heard to K. Brown, unreferenced).

After emigrating from Ontario in 1996, John became the provincial soil fertility extension specialist for Manitoba Agriculture. John transferred his Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) membership to Prairie CCA in 1998, making his move to Manitoba complete! He has been a strong advocate for the CCA program over the years.

Throughout his career, John worked with colleagues from Manitoba Agriculture, the University of Manitoba, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and many other industry agronomists to gather on-farm data and provide extension services. He often employed unique techniques to make his presentations more engaging, including developing an obsession with collecting state and provincial soils (Photo 1) and dressing to be even more relatable to his farmer audience (Photo 2)!



**Photo 1.** John collecting a soil profile to add to his growing collection. John advocated for demystification of pedologist-lingo and the promotion of practical soil management.



**Photo 2.** John dressed-to-impress with fellow overall enthusiast, Andrew Delgarno.

## Results and Observations

**Table 1: Number of soil fertility extension activities (1996-2023).**

Extension Activities	Number*
Oral Presentations developed (2009-2023 only)	101
Poster Presentations† (2001-2023 only)	47
Crop Diagnostic Schools	21
Manitoba Agronomists Conferences	23
Soil Fertility Advisory Committee Meetings	23
Additional Observations: ✓ Summer students tormented ✓ Curse words uttered over technology issues ✓ Times colleagues heard the the phrase “I have a great idea...for something that <i>you</i> should do!”	Too many to count!

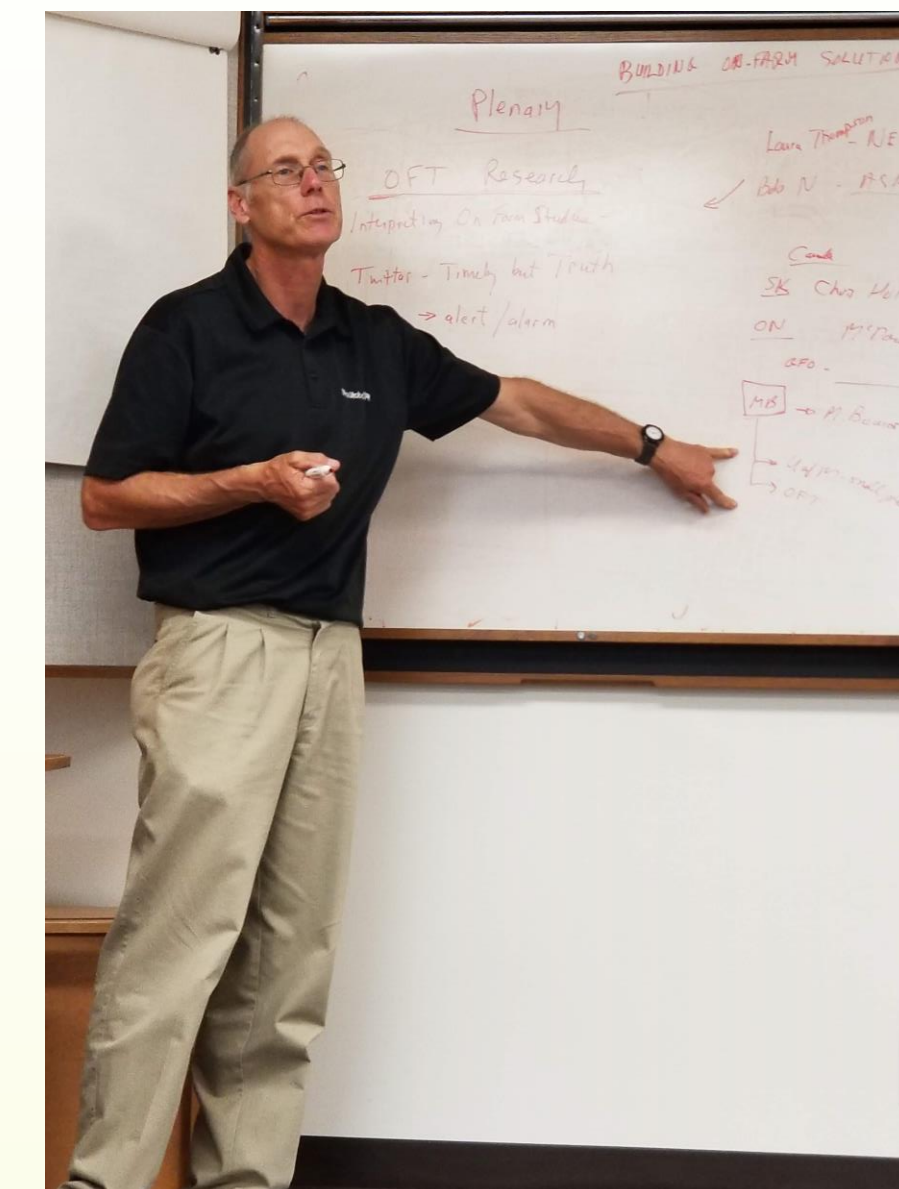
\*Inaccuracies may exist, despite the thirty-seven‡ hours spent by the authors doing their best to count the many documents in John Heard's file archives.  
†All posters made by John Heard include the traditional yellow and green background used by the authors in the creation of this poster (because it felt right!).  
‡Inaccuracies may exist, despite the efforts of the authors to track time spent working on this amazing poster.



**Photo 4.** John presenting to a captivated audience of agronomists at Crop Diagnostic School.



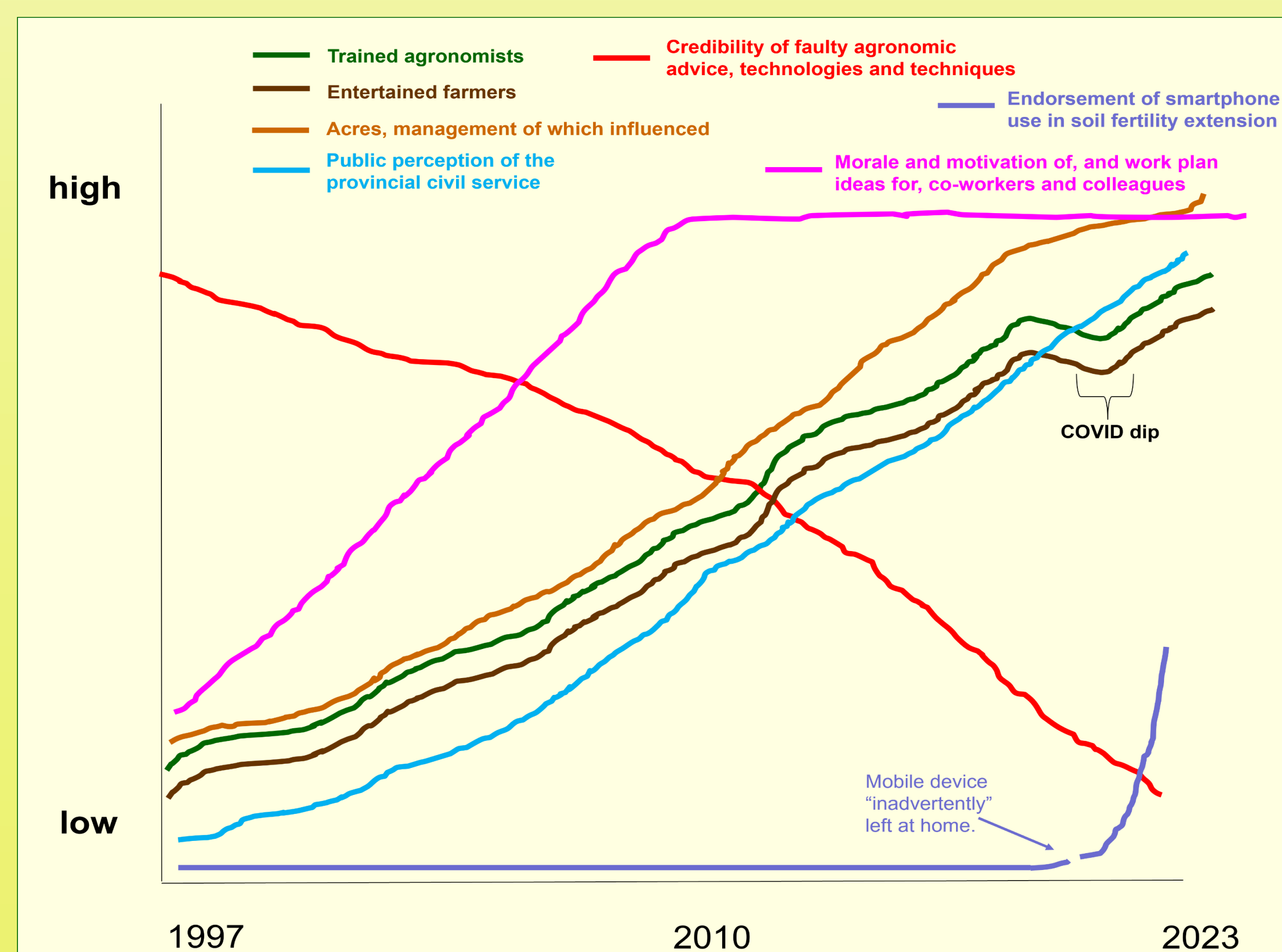
**Photo 5.** John conducting a nitrogen rate trial on corn.



**Photo 3.** John feeling comfortable with a “low tech” option for brainstorming ideas!

**Table 2. John's legacy and impacts on agriculture in Manitoba.**

Item	Before John	After John
Conference Style	Updates	Training Sessions
Approach to Research	Qualitative Comparisons	On-Farm Tests
Extension Style	Lectures	Interactive, solution-based, and entertaining!



**Figure 1.** Effects of a John Heard-occupied provincial soil fertility extension post on the farming community, agricultural land, the civil service and society generally.

## Discussion and Summary

As presented in Table 1, John was very active in his role as extension specialist for soil fertility. He resurrected, revamped and/or restarted many old extension activities into the events we know today (ex: Manitoba Agri-Forum became the Manitoba Agronomists Conference).

John's enthusiasm for his work rubbed off on his colleagues; however, he sometimes was a little ahead of everyone else. Dennis Lange recalls that John was so excited to have a new pulse specialist coming on board that he called almost a month before his job started to see if he was already working on lesson ideas for Crop Diagnostic School! (2023 communication from D. Lange to M. Riekman, unreferenced)

During his career, John was not solely focused on soil fertility, but on how proper fertilizer management also fits within a good agronomy program. John was (and still is) an avid supporter of the CCA program. He was even named International CCA of the Year in 2014, recognized for his contribution to agronomy through effective communication and extension activities (Dawson, 2014). John emphasized the importance of understanding the management that each individual crop requires to achieve high yields. Recalling past presentations given by John on corn nitrogen management, Jason Voogt fondly remembers John saying, “this is the difference between a corn grower and a grower that grows corn!” (2023 communication to M. Riekman, unreferenced).

We, the agricultural community in Manitoba, have been privileged to work with and learn from John Heard over the years. As stated by Steve Barron, his “common sense approach to guiding and advancing on-farm nutrition knowledge and management hits the mark. His direct, relatable communication style translates academic tech jargon into practical, on-farm practices” (2023 communication to M. Riekman, unreferenced).

John has always known who is the ultimate beneficiary of his work ...and that is the farmer. Those who attended one of his many extension presentations knew that they would always learn something new from him. Of his experiences working with Manitoba's soil fertility extension agent, Jonothon Hodson says that “farming in an area of multiple soil types has led to many fertility challenges and I always knew John, if called upon, would have advice on the approach we should take (2023 communication to K. Brown, unreferenced). Practical advice that would result in implementation – a true testament to an exemplary career!

In summary, the authors hope that readers (including John) have enjoyed this light-hearted tribute as much as we enjoyed putting it together!

## Reference

Dawson, A. 2014 Sept 24. MAFRD's John Heard wins major international award. Manitoba Co-operator. [accessed 2023 Dec 12]; <https://www.manitobacooperator.ca/crops/mafrds-john-heard-wins-major-international-award-2/>

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank John Heard for the many years of mentorship and friendship. We wish him all the best in his well-deserved retirement!