Every farm manager has production and quality goals when it comes to feeding livestock. For Jeff Fields, the task is a little more complicated, since he and his crew are responsible for not only managing the 2,500-plus-acre farm, but also creating feed for a wider range of livestock than your average farm. Fields is the farm operations manager for the Purdue University Animal Science Research Center, which means the operation is providing feed for dairy, beef, poultry, swine and sheep at the facility.

“It’s a diverse group of animals,” Fields says. The soft-spoken Fields is responsible for running the cropping systems at the farm, which is a self-supporting operation that’s part of the university. And in the last three years he’s been adding new tech to his feed-making

The farm is harvesting forages — corn, cereal rye and alfalfa — with a John Deere 7380 self-propelled forage harvester. Fields, a longtime user of combine yield monitors, learned a few years ago of HarvestLab, a real-time system that measures forage moisture and a range of other feed factors during harvest. “When John Deere first approached us about the system I was super-excited to find out how accurate it would be,” Fields says.

Turns out it’s very accurate, especially when it comes to forage moisture content — a critical component when putting up quality feed. “This system is spot-on accurate,” Fields has learned.

Multiple storage options
For the Purdue facility, Fields is putting feed into a range of storage systems — upright silos, large bunkers and silage bags. In each case, moisture levels are important, and knowing them during harvest — without the need for a laborious moisture test that can take time, and may not be accurate — has been very valuable.

“We used to do the test where you would grab samples in a field and run them through a process,” Fields says. “But how accurate can that be? Did you pick samples that were representative?” Add in that the test can take up to 30 minutes, and it’s time lost that could be used for harvesting forages.

“In the past, we would have a certain number of loads to a silage bag, and we would have a rough idea of what was in bag 16AC six months later,” he recalls. “Today, I can tell you exactly how many loads, their moisture content and the hybrid information for every load in each bag.”

Higher-precision information combined with real-time in-field data is helping Fields and his team produce quality forages for the farm.