

Minnesota NewsWatch

Ag salaries range widely across U.S.

BY TOM J. BECHMAN

WHAT can your son or daughter expect to earn after investing in four years of college and pursuing a career in agriculture? Maybe they come home to farm, either now or in the future, or maybe they embark on a permanent career off the farm. Either way, it's helpful to know what ag graduates can expect, based upon salaries obtained by recent graduates.

Each year, ag colleges across the country compile information on December and May graduates, reporting their career choices and salaries, notes Alan Talbert, an ag education instructor in Purdue University's College of Agriculture. Twenty colleges participated in the 2015-16 study, including Purdue and ag colleges in Minnesota, Wisconsin and South Dakota. The study is coordinated by Iowa State University. The Midwest, Great Plains, Southeast and Southwest are well-represented in the study.

Here are three key findings of the 2015-16 study. Refer to the graphic at right for more details.

■ **There's a wide range for starting salaries for ag teachers nationwide.** Roger Carr, Clinton Central High School, Michigantown, Ind., raised eyebrows when he recently commented that the way to cure the ag teacher shortage is to pay them what they are worth. He floated the idea of paying an ag teacher \$100,000 per year if you want a quality program.

While Carr was trying to make a point, he may not be as far off as you'd think.

Key Points

- Universities cooperate to compile information on ag grad salaries.
- The average starting salary varies depending upon the field.
- The range of salaries within a single career can be broad.

According to the ag salary study, the average starting salary for an ag teacher this year was \$40,044. But the range is what's surprising. On the low end, someone is teaching for \$23,000. On the high end, one school district is paying \$58,500 for a first-year ag teacher.

■ **Agronomists earn more than ag teachers, but not that much more.** One of the reasons given for the current ag teacher shortage is that other industries are stealing ag ed graduates. There's no doubt that's happening, but it's not reflected dramatically in starting salaries.

For example, the average salary for a beginning agronomist was \$44,382 — just over \$4,000 more than for an ag teacher. The range reported for agronomists is narrower, from \$32,800 to \$60,000. Fourteen agronomists in the study were hired by farms at an average salary of \$47,954.

■ **Forestry and wildlife careers aren't where the money is.** Despite being popular career goals for kids who like the outdoors, if your goal is to make money, forestry and wildlife career paths might not be the best choice, according to the study. The average starting salary for a wildlife biologist, technician or researcher was \$28,971. The range was from \$18,720 to \$50,000 per year.



WHO MAKES MORE? Which person makes more — the custom applicator who drives this rig, the precision ag specialist who programs it or the agronomist who

STARTING SALARIES FOR AG GRADUATES

AG AREA OF STUDY/ OCCUPATION	AVERAGE SALARY		
	AVERAGE	LOW	HIGH
Ag economics and ag business	\$46,045	\$12,000	\$80,000
Farm manager	44,728	31,200	60,000
Grain merchandiser	52,154	25,000	75,000
Ag education and communication	\$41,079	\$12,000	\$72,000
Ag teacher	40,044	23,000	58,500
Cooperative Extension	34,650	28,900	45,000
Agronomy and crop science	\$44,085	\$12,000	\$83,000
Agronomist	44,962	32,800	60,000
Sales rep	46,700	25,500	55,000
Animal and dairy science	\$37,361	\$10,000	\$78,000
Sales rep	43,909	21,840	78,000
Vet technician	24,556	16,250	40,000
Biological sciences	\$33,357	\$10,000	\$71,250
Biochemist	45,313	32,000	71,250
Public health specialist	27,715	13,867	52,000
Forestry, wildlife and environment	\$34,521	\$10,000	\$70,000
Wildlife biologist	28,971	18,720	50,000
Conservation officer	29,749	19,760	52,000
Food science and nutrition	\$42,914	\$12,500	\$72,000
Production technologist	51,513	40,000	63,000
Sensory test specialist	42,640	31,200	54,000
Horticulture	\$36,263	\$12,000	\$70,000
Landscape design	42,919	33,280	60,000
Greenhouse production	39,404	30,000	45,000
Biosystems engineering	\$53,649	\$23,120	\$81,250
General engineer	56,977	33,750	81,350
Precision ag specialist	43,500	35,000	58,000



Source: 2015-16 Entry-level salary information for recent graduates in agriculture and related disciplines survey. Salary information gathered from 20 universities.