



As producers rely more on computer programs to manage their farming operations, the need to safeguard data becomes a priority. Two options to consider when protecting your data are prevention and backups.

An ounce of prevention

Prevention includes routine maintenance, such as regularly running the Windows defragment utility, and making sure your computer electrical components are protected. Two common types of electrical protection include:

1. Surge protector: These devices are designed to protect your computer against voltage spikes. They attempt to regulate the voltage supplies to your computer. In general, the effectiveness of these devices depends on the quality of the device.
2. Uninterrupted power supply (UPS), also known as battery backups. These are currently very affordable, with most

ranging from \$50 to \$150. Some even come with software that will automatically shut down your computer if you're not there. To extend battery run time, plug in only the hardware you use to save data plus any elements you want on if the power fails.

Deciding which type to purchase depends on how much you're willing to spend and how valuable your data is to you. Be sure to check the vendor's equipment-damage insurance. Some cover the cost of repair or replacement. Read the vendor's policy carefully!

A second line of defense

Few things are more frustrating than finding out a data file isn't usable. Redemption comes when you can locate and restore the missing data from your backup. This lets you resume your task without much lost time or effort.



Editor's note: Kent Vickre and Dwight Raab write a tax and finance column for each issue of Pioneer GrowingPoint® magazine. Vickre is state coordinator of the Iowa Farm Business Association. Raab is state coordinator of Illinois Farm Business Farm Management. They address issues that influence agribusiness success.



What's really terrifying is finding out a data file isn't usable and realizing you don't have a backup.

When they're asked how often a person should back up valuable data, IT professionals routinely respond: "It depends on how much time you want to spend trying to recover your data."

Ideally, those of us using computers and creating data files — whether word processing, spreadsheet or financial account software files — would create a backup copy every time we complete our task. That way, we'd lose minimal time retrieving data from backup source.

A network of options

When looking for a backup method, keep in mind there are numerous software programs and data storage devices available. Software choices may include using the backup utilities with a specific program or using separate software designed to back up your entire computer.

Also, if you have Vista Home, Premium, Business or Ultimate, be sure to check the backup features already included as part of these operating systems. This Vista backup utility allows Windows to automatically back up the entire computer or individual files at a specified time.

Another consideration is which backup media to use: CD/DVD, external hard drive, online storage or flash memory. The major consideration here is how much data you want to save, the cost and the time requirements.

If you're backing up your entire computer, an external hard drive is the simplest method. It allows the most storage. Most external hard drives come with their own backup software.

CDs and DVDs also allow users to backup their entire computer. However, we may not always spend the necessary time to get it done routinely. Nobody likes

to sit and swap disks in their computer for hours.

Thumbs up for USBs

On the other hand, if you're backing up data from a specific software program, many users agree the best and simplest small-scale backup tool is the flash-based USB drive. The only pitfall seems to be that some users remove them WITHOUT turning them off first. Remember, you can plug a flash-based USB drive in anytime but you must only remove it after shutting down the device or turning off your computer.

This ensures data copying is complete. These devices are small enough and durable enough to fit in your pocket. If you're worried about losing one, it may ease your mind to know most allow you to encrypt data to stop prying eyes from viewing your information.

Cover the key points

Regardless of how you choose to back up your data, the key factors are:

1. Just do it. Anything is better than nothing.
2. Make multiple copies. Don't rely on a single copy because even backups can go bad.
3. Test your backup. Make sure you know what data is actually copying.
4. Keep an off-site copy. If your computer and backup are on the same site, one fire or flood will destroy all your data.

The more layers of backup protection, the more you'll minimize the chance of suffering a data loss. If your hard drive fails in December and you have no backup, you may be faced with entry of a whole year's worth of financial transactions over the Christmas holidays to produce the accrual income statements, balance sheets and other financial reports needed to analyze your business. This is not a pleasant thought. 🌱

Plugging in to USB drives

In the late 1990s, the computer industry adopted a technology called the universal serial bus, known as USB. The result is USB ports on our computers — handy outlets to attach many of our peripheral computer devices.

The technology provides high-speed data transfer between the peripheral device and the computer. Things like printers, scanners and digital cameras connect to our computers via USB ports to transfer large amounts of data very quickly.

Then came the "flash" drive (they go by many names, including USB drive, thumb drive, jump drive, etc.). These devices have been able to store increasing amounts of data. They originally held as little as 64 to 128 megabytes of data. Now inexpensive versions hold 4, 8 or even 16 gigabytes of data.

These devices make excellent storage locations for backup data. They're small and can easily be transported, allowing you to store them in a separate location from the computer. This provides two layers of security: a backup and off-site storage of data.

For an extra layer of security, buy two USB drives and label them A and B. When you make backups — whether daily, weekly or monthly — alternate between the two devices. Then, if one of them happens to fail, you have a second working backup source. 🌱

