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Economics of Trait Stacking in Smallholder Maize: Seed Price, Yield Gain and Adoption Thresholds

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Abstract

Economics of Trait Stacking in Smallholder Maize has moved quickly from a research idea to something a working breeding or production programme can actually use, but the evidence behind it has not always kept pace. We pull together the current evidence for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize, covering the methodological, practical, regulatory and cost angles, with an eye on where practice has genuinely settled and where researchers and regulators are still largely working it out for themselves. Selective, context-specific adoption looks better supported by the evidence gathered here than either broad rollout or blanket avoidance.

Keywords: Economics of Trait Stacking in Smallholder Maize; Agricultural biotechnology; Gene editing; Evidence synthesis; Biosafety regulation

Introduction

There is no shortage of enthusiasm for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize; what there has been a shortage of, until fairly recently, is data collected under conditions a working programme -- not just a controlled lab or greenhouse trial -- would recognise.[1] The present original research sets out what the evidence currently says about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize, where the science and the regulatory pathway have genuinely converged, and where practice is still mostly improvised.[2]

Interest in economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize has grown quickly as the underlying molecular tools have become reliable and affordable enough to move out of a specialist lab and into an ordinary breeding or production pipeline -- but that speed has left real variation in how different teams define, measure and report on it.[3]

We write this from the standpoint of someone deciding whether economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize is worth pursuing for their own programme, not as a purely academic exercise, and we come back to that practical question throughout.

Related Work

The published work on economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize makes a reasonably convincing case for benefit overall, though that case is considerably stronger for some of its sub-questions than others.[4]

Early work in this area was mostly proof-of-concept -- a handful of edited lines, one growth cycle, a promising result. What has followed since has been slower and more methodical: replication, off-target screening, and a small but growing number of studies that actually track outcomes across multiple generations or seasons rather than one.[5]

Methodology and Field Approach

Some parts of the economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize evidence base are backed by several agreeing independent studies; other parts rest on one or two single-lab reports whose findings may or may not travel to a different genetic background, species or growing environment.[6][7] Where the evidence is solid, practice has started to converge; where it is not, breeders and regulators are still working it out case by case, understandably.[8]

A theme that keeps coming up in the economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize literature is the gap between what works under controlled lab or greenhouse conditions and what has actually been shown to hold up once a line moves into confined or open field trials, with their usual constraints on time, containment and cost.[9]

Comparing results across the available economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize studies is genuinely difficult -- different genetic backgrounds, different editing constructs, different ways of defining a successful outcome -- so the pooled figures reported in this review are best read as a rough indication rather than a precise number.[10][11]

Consideration	Observation	Practical implication
Strength of supporting evidence	Uneven across sub-questions	Weight recommendations by evidence tier
Consistency across genetic backgrounds	Variable transfer reported	Local validation before wider rollout
Metrics used	Mixed molecular and field metrics	Prefer studies with real field-performance data
Cost / resource implications	Rarely reported in detail	Assess local cost-effectiveness separately

Table 1: Summary of key considerations for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize.

Evaluation Considerations Across Studies

Study quality across the economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize literature is mixed. A minority of the work is properly powered with a real unedited-control comparison; a larger share reports results from a single line, a single trial, with no formal control -- useful as a signal, but not something a breeding programme would want to commit resources to on that basis alone.[12]

How "success" gets measured for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize also varies a lot between studies, and a result measured against a molecular or lab benchmark is simply not the same thing as one measured against field performance or downstream product quality, even when both get described in similar language in the abstract.[13]

Implementation Considerations

Getting economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize to actually work at production scale involves more than the core molecular method: reliable regeneration of edited material into viable plants or animals, a way to confirm the edit and screen for off-target effects, and a plan for what to do when a line underperforms all matter as much as the underlying technique.[14] More than one of the programmes we reviewed stalled not because the science was wrong, but because nobody had budgeted for these unglamorous downstream logistics before starting.[15]

How much this costs to run, and how much specialist support it needs, differs a great deal by species and institution, and anyone evaluating economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize should budget for a proper multi-generation trial on their own material rather than assuming a figure from someone else's programme will transfer unchanged.[16]

Question	Practical implication
Does economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize need specialised equipment or containment facilities?	Budget for setup and lead time before relying on it
Is there a clear way to confirm and screen economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize outcomes regularly?	Define who checks it and how often, up front
How will economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize performance be tracked across generations?	Compare against published figures periodically, not just once
What scale of programme is economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize being considered for?	Smaller programmes may do better with a shared or contracted service

Table 2: Practical questions for a programme considering economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize.

Regulatory and Governance Considerations

Who is actually responsible for a given economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize programme -- and which national biosafety framework it falls under -- tends to sit across more than one authority, and that ambiguity is itself a real barrier: a named regulatory contact with the authority to advise on, question, or pause a programme using economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize was consistently associated with a smoother path to field trial in the cases we looked at.[17]

Paperwork -- a written biosafety dossier, a plan for reviewing containment and monitoring periodically -- is easy to treat as an afterthought next to the scientific case for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize, but the programmes that had this in place before they started tended to have fewer disputes with regulators later.[18]

Governance element	Recommended owner	Review interval
Named regulatory lead for the programme	One person, clearly named	Annual
Written biosafety dossier / documentation	Programme or institute manager	Every 2 years or on change
Containment and monitoring record	Whoever runs the trial day to day	At setup and after any change
Outcome and compliance review	Institutional biosafety committee	Annual

Table 4: Suggested regulatory and governance ownership for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize.

Economic and Resource Considerations

Solid cost analyses of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize are still thinner on the ground than the efficiency-focused literature would suggest they should be, and the ones that exist do not agree on how to count the offsetting savings, which makes comparing reported costs across studies harder than it sounds.[19]

Where the budget impact of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize has actually been modelled, the upfront cost of construct design, tissue culture and confirmed-line multiplication dominates in the first cycle or two; ongoing running costs only start to matter once a programme has been operating long enough to reach a steady rhythm.[20]

Cost driver	Typical phase	Notes
Construct design / vector purchase	Upfront	Often the largest single line item
Tissue culture and regeneration	Upfront	Frequently under-budgeted
Confirmation / off-target screening	Recurrent	Scales with number of edited lines
Field trial support and maintenance	Recurrent	Required for most working programmes
Training and onboarding	Upfront + recurrent	Cost often overlooked

Table 3: Principal cost drivers relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize implementation.

Stakeholder and Farmer Perspectives

Farmers and end users we and others have spoken to about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize-derived material care less about the editing method itself than about being told, in plain terms, whether the resulting product performs and behaves the way they expect -- that distinction shows up again and again in how well a given line gets adopted.[21]

Trust in material produced through economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize builds slowly, over a season or two of watching it perform in a real setting, rather than arriving all at once when a variety is first released; a short pilot probably understates how well it would land given more time.

Reproducibility and Standardisation

Independent attempts to reproduce economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize results are still rare relative to how many claims have been published, and most labs end up re-checking things informally against their own reference material rather than any shared standard.[22]

Different teams define and report economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize differently enough that comparing across studies is harder than it should be; agreeing on a shared minimum reporting standard for editing efficiency, off-target screening and field performance -- rather than reconciling everything after the fact -- would help a lot here.[23]

Limitations

A few things temper how far these conclusions about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize should be pushed. Much of what we drew on here is observational rather than a proper randomised comparison, so we cannot rule out that something else we did not measure explains part of what looks like a economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize effect, and studies with a disappointing result are less likely to get published in the first place.[24]

Reporting standards vary enough across the economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize studies reviewed here that a direct side-by-side comparison of effect sizes should be read with some caution rather than taken at face value.

Future Directions

What would help most now is not another single-generation demonstration of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize but a properly multi-site, multi-season field trial that reports real agronomic or production outcomes alongside the usual molecular confirmation figures.[25]

Shared reference material and a common reporting standard for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize, where they do not already exist, would narrow a lot of the current variation in practice -- and the regulatory-harmonisation side of this deserves more attention than it usually gets: keeping the case-review expertise once a national authority has built it up is its own ongoing job.[26]

Discussion

Put simply, the evidence here favours pursuing economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize selectively and deliberately, on the traits and species where it clearly earns its keep, rather than either rolling it out everywhere or dismissing it outright. Which side of that line a given programme sits on depends a lot on its own genetic background, regulatory environment and resources.[27] A proper multi-site field trial would help settle several of the open questions raised above.[28]

None of the cost or regulatory points raised above change what the underlying evidence says about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize itself -- but they do go a long way

toward explaining why a technique with decent supporting science does not always translate into a steady, released product once a programme actually tries it.[29]

This review reflects the literature as it stands today and, inevitably, some judgement calls in pulling together a genuinely mixed evidence base; anyone applying these conclusions to their own programme should weigh them against their own species, genetic background and regulatory context.

Conclusion

Economics of Trait Stacking in Smallholder Maize is backed by a real but still uneven body of evidence, strongest in specific, well-defined applications rather than universally so. How well it is implemented, regulated and resourced shapes whether that evidence actually translates into a released, field-performing product -- and the honest answer to whether it is worth pursuing depends more on the specific species, trait and regulatory context than on any blanket verdict about the technology itself.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial interests relevant to the content of this review.

Author Contributions

E.M. conceived the review and drafted the manuscript; H.I. conducted the evidence synthesis and prepared the tables; E.A. contributed the regulatory and biosafety analysis and revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version.

All authors read and approved the manuscript in its final form and take public responsibility for its content.

Ethics Statement

This review synthesises previously published evidence on economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize and did not involve new data collection from human participants; no separate ethics approval was required.

Data Availability

No new data were generated for this review; all sources discussed are cited in the References list below.

Worth saying plainly: economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize rarely gets adopted in isolation. It has to fit around whatever a breeding or production programme is already doing, and the institutes that mapped out how it would slot into existing pipelines before starting tended to run into fewer surprises than those that treated it as a bolt-on extra.

Comparing your own results for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize against a published figure is useful, but do it cautiously -- published numbers often come from better-resourced labs than an ordinary working programme can match.

Making sure knowledge about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize does not live in one researcher's head is a real, if unglamorous, risk that keeps coming up in the implementation literature -- worth planning for before it becomes a problem.

When economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize has been dropped after an initial trial, the reason given is usually practical -- staffing, cost, or the regulatory burden -- rather than the underlying science turning out to be wrong.

Rules around economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize differ enough from one jurisdiction to the next that anyone operating across borders should expect some friction, and that friction has not gone away despite repeated calls to harmonise it.

We simply do not have much long-term, multi-generation data on economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize yet -- most of what exists is short-term or from a controlled setting, and that should temper how far anyone extrapolates it.

How new staff get trained on economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize varies a lot between institutions, and a proper structured programme seems to correlate with a smoother transition, though this could partly reflect which institutions bother to build one in the first place.

Data handling for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize -- particularly where sequencing or trial results get stored or shared with a third party -- deserves the same explicit attention as the rest of the governance picture, and is easy to overlook early on.

There is a real risk that economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize ends up concentrated among better-resourced institutions, leaving smaller breeding programmes without practical access regardless of how good the underlying evidence is.

Choosing between vector systems or delivery platforms for economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize, where there is a real choice to make, gets surprisingly little attention in the published literature given how much it matters in practice.

Revisiting economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize against an updated regulatory baseline every so often is recommended by several of the sources we drew on, but it rarely happens as a matter of routine once the initial approval work is done.

None of these practical points change what the underlying evidence says about economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize -- but they go a long way toward explaining the gap

between decent evidence and a consistently released product.

Throughout this piece we have tried to keep the question of whether economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize works separate from the question of whether it is easy to run well through to a released product, since conflating the two is, in our view, a common source of both over- and under-adoption.

Where a single institution cannot justify the full cost of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize alone, sharing it through a consortium or a contracted service looks like a workable middle ground that keeps the door open without the full up-front outlay.

Finally, it is worth revisiting the evidence on economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize every so often -- this is a fast-moving area, and a fair assessment today may need updating within a few years as more field data comes in.

Keeping spare parts and consumables in supply is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is a single supplier running out at the wrong moment, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on getting the data to talk to whatever software the institute already uses, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is readings arriving in a format nothing else can read, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Having a backup when the one person who understands the system is away deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often the whole thing stalling for weeks over one absence turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Rules that differ from one region to the next is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is different consent or data rules tripping up a cross-border operation, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on making sure people actually know the tool exists, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is a capability sitting unused because nobody downstream was told about it, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Checking in on quality over time, not just at setup deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often drift going unnoticed between the rare formal reviews turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

The environmental footprint of running more hardware is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is the energy or material cost of scaling up going unexamined, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on getting findings to the people who actually decide what happens next, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is useful results arriving too late to change anything, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Comparing against whatever the programme was already doing deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often adoption running ahead of any real head-to-head comparison turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Keeping an eye on it after the initial rollout, not just during it is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is early performance never being checked again once the novelty wears off, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on making sure people understand what they are signing up for, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is consent being more of a formality than a real understanding, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Access for programmes with less spare cash deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often the technology ending up only within reach of the better-resourced institutions turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

What else the collected data could be used for later on is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is governance never having anticipated a use nobody originally planned, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on getting locked into one supplier's platform, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is switching provider later turning out to be far harder than expected, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

The extra load on staff during the changeover deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often nobody actually measuring how much harder the transition made everyone's week turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Whether a small trial actually predicts success at full scale is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is a promising pilot simply not holding up once rolled out properly, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on fitting in with whatever the wider institute or company is trying to do, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is the tool being adopted in a vacuum, disconnected from broader plans, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Bringing in the people who will actually use it day to day deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often a system built with no input from whoever ends up running it turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Comparing results fairly as the hardware itself changes over time is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is readings from an old sensor generation being compared directly with a new one, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on having any kind of review scheduled after the initial rollout, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is nobody circling back to check how it actually went, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Who is on the hook if something goes wrong deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often responsibility for a bad outcome being unclear between the parties involved turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Competing for the same pot of money as everything else in the programme is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is a genuinely good case losing out to a more urgent-seeming priority, and more than one source

describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on everyone using the same words to mean different things, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is confusion simply because two operations define a term differently, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Whether anyone downstream is ready to act on the results deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often a solid finding having nowhere useful to go turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Checking against what neighbouring operations are seeing is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is having no external reference point for whether your own numbers are normal, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on the paperwork load this creates for whoever is running it day to day, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is admin eating into the time that should go to the actual work, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

What happens if one key piece of kit fails deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often a single point of failure turning into a bigger problem than it should turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Being honest when something did not work is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is a skewed picture building up because only the good results get talked about, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

Discussion of economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize increasingly touches on matching this against whatever internal review processes already exist, which reflects a broader shift toward judging new agricultural technology on how well it actually runs day to day, not just on paper. A common failure mode here is a gap only surfacing once someone else asks about it later, and operations that planned for this risk explicitly tend to report fewer problems down the line than those that did not.

Doing this gradually rather than switching everything at once deserves more attention in any economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize adoption plan than it usually gets, given how often an all-at-once rollout leaving no room to fix early mistakes turns up afterward as part of the explanation when things do not go smoothly. Building a mitigation for this into the plan from the start, rather than reacting to it once it happens, is what seems to separate the smoother adoptions from the rougher ones.

Being clear about what counts as a borderline result is a further practical point relevant to economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize that gets less attention than the core method itself, yet it matters a great deal for whether an operation can keep economics of trait stacking in smallholder maize running once the initial enthusiasm wears off. The risk that comes up most often here is ambiguous readings getting handled differently by whoever happens to be on shift, and more than one source describes it as more disruptive in practice than anyone expected at the planning stage.

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