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A conservation system for you

Adaptable...flexible... customized, no matter what they call conservation tillage, there is a system for you. With different systems available, you are not required to use just one general practice to keep 30 percent of the soil surface covered with residue after planting. That's what conservation tillage is all about... keeping the ground covered with crop residue.

When looking at practices available, consider how serious is erosion affecting your soil's productivity, which system fits into your conservation plan, and what local equipment is available and being used, suggests District Conservationist, Steve Yaddof, of US Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service.

Then look at the pros and cons of the systems available: no-till, ridge-till, strip-till, mulch-till, or other minimum tillage practices.

No-till: With no-till, the soil is left undisturbed. Seeds are planted in a narrow seedbed about one to three inches wide. Weed control is accomplished primarily with herbicides.

Ridge-till: With ridge-till, the soil is left undisturbed. Crops are planted on ridges usually four to six inches higher than the row middles. A

combination of herbicides and cultivation is used for weed control. Cultivation is also used to rebuild the ridges.

Strip-till: With strip-till, the soil is left undisturbed. About a third of the soil surface is tilled at planting time. The seedbed is made in the row by a roto-tiller, in-row chisel, or row cleaner. Weeds are controlled with herbicides and some cultivation.

Mulch-till: With the mulch-till method of conservation tillage, the total soil surface is disturbed by tillage before planting. Such tillage tools as chisels, field cultivators, discs, or sweeps are used. Weed control is with herbicides and some cultivation.

Others: Generally, conservation tillage includes any tillage and planting system where 30 percent or more of the soil is covered by crop residue after planting. The form of conservation tillage used depends on the site, local conditions, and grower's needs.

To help you get started, see what your neighbors are using with success. Perhaps they leased machinery, or modified an old planter. Talk to them about what works best for them. For technical assistance, contact the USDA's Soil Conservation Service.