



The Farm Page

No-till clinic/tour set for June 6

A No-Till Clinic/Tour will be held on June 6th beginning at 1:00 p.m. at the Bob Utter farm located 3 miles east of Columbus Jct. on Hwy. 92. This tour is sponsored by the Louisa County Extension Office, the Louisa County SCS, and Bob and Nance Utter.

The clinic/tour will begin with an overview of the field work done by Bob this spring. Equipment used in the operation will be available for viewing. Then, several short clinics on equipment and weed control in no-till fields, nitrate testing, and residue measurement.

Greg Brenneman, Ext. Soil and Water Engineering Specialist, will discuss weed control strategies; Al Seim, Ext. Crop Pro-

duction Specialist, will review the spring nitrate test; and Wendell Jones, Louisa Co. District Conservationist, will highlight residue measurement.

We will then view no-till fields of corn/corn, corn/soybeans, and soybeans/corn. Other no-till fields of corn/alfalfa, red clover, and sudan grass can also be viewed at your option.

This will be an excellent opportunity to see how no-till works not just as an option for conservation compliance, but as an alternative to conserving our soil. The rain date is June 11th. Contact the Louisa County Extension or SCS Office for more information.

Conservation tillage-fad or future

Conservation tillage is defined as tillage and/or planting operations that will leave at least 30% crop residue on the soil surface after planting, including no-till and ridge till systems. Residue levels of less than 30% offer little protection from erosion by wind or water. Tillage practices that result in 30% residue are referred to as conventional tillage.

In the spring of 1989 an annual survey of cropland along an established route was conducted by the SCS, Extension Service, and the ASCS to determine a reasonable estimate of the acres in the county that are using some form of conservation tillage. 1989 results showed that conservation tillage acres were down below four percent in comparison to the results from previous years that had been as high as twenty-five percent.

It is obvious that the drought of 1988 had an adverse impact on crop yields in that year, thus resulting in less residue in 1989, but most fields were clean tilled with ten percent or less crop residue.

With the 1985 Farm Bill's requirement that certain highly erodible lands have a fully implemented conservation plan by 1995, conservation tillage will again receive a boost in Louisa County. Over 90% of the plans developed by producers locally include some form of conservation tillage. This is a popular soil-saving option in the plans mainly because of its relative low cost when compared to terraces, and because dwindling cattle numbers means that few people are interested in long term seeding as a conservation option. Even so, many farmers are concerned that they will not be able to follow plans of conservation tillage and still realize a sufficient profit.

Much of the skepticism about conservation tillage is natural as with any new concept. However, several factors of the past have tended to present some real concerns. During its introduction years in the early to mid 1970s, conservation tillage (esp. no-till) was promoted as being advantageous to farmers by saving them valuable time, fuel,

machinery, money and soil. There has been little argument that no-till saves time, fuel and machinery, but there is still a fairly widespread belief that no-till doesn't save money, and a few even argue that not much soil is saved with no-till.

Many early experimenters of high residue farming found that higher herbicide cost, poor stands, inability to properly place fertilizers, and lower yields, often offset most of the potential dollar savings.

Reliable herbicides used in past years that gave predictably good weed control, sometimes failed — fields had to be re-sprayed. Chemical companies routinely recommended up to two times the normal rate of herbicides. Post emergent chemicals used in high residue farming usually were much more expensive than incorporation type herbicides. During the early years, planters that could handle the residue and properly place fertilizers were few and far between. Attempts with mediocre

ones resulted in spotty stands — fields had to be replanted.

These factors led to some bad experiences which generally were observed by many doubtful onlookers. In turn, this has had negative effects on the attitude of many towards conservation tillage. One possible reason the acreage planted with such tillage has declined.

Today, planters and a variety of other implements are designed to accommodate high residue farming. Excellent stands are easily achieved. Many new post-emergence and pre-emergent herbicides have been developed that are a major improvement for weed control with high residue levels. Not only do these newer chemicals provide good weed control, many are safer in comparison to traditionally used herbicides for conventional tillage in that they persist in the soil for very short periods of time if at all. Prices for herbicides once thought of as "no-till chemicals" have been on a downward trend and are now more affordable.

Improved crop varieties have been developed for conservation tillage, and generally, much more research has been done. Information is now readily available to assist the farmer in making the needed decisions to implement this type of tillage system on their farm.

The chance for failure based on many of the earlier mentioned problems of the past associated with conservation tillage has been greatly reduced. The area of weed control remains somewhat challenging, and newcomers to conservation tillage today will likely be confronted with what may at first appear to be more complex management decisions. However, once familiar with the available options, decisions almost become as routine as those associated with convention tillage systems. It's a matter of re-education. In many cases, farm operators will need to take a new in-depth look at pesticides, weeds, insects, farm implements, soils, and profit margins.

Tips for those considering conservation tillage would be:

(1) Start farming with conservation tillage a few acres at a time to familiarize yourself with the different management needed.

(2) Keep detailed records of products used, timeliness of application, weather conditions,

input cost, yield info, etc.

(3) Obtain information on conservation tillage by contacting SCS or Extension Service, attending tillage meetings, seminars, and tours.

(4) Talk to others who have been successfully using conservation tillage. Most will gladly share helpful pointers.

In support of conservation tillage and its soil saving capabilities, I would like to point out that during the dust storm of May 17, very little or no soil was moving on fields that had not been tilled and were protected by residue. This sheet erosion by wind removed a thin uniform layer of soil from many fields. No gullies were formed and many tons of soil were lost. This is the same way that the practically invisible sheet erosion by water robs farmers of their most important resource. However, because no gullies occur after a rain, many assume that no soil erosion is taking place. This is seldom the case. One of the greatest challenges of the SCS today is to help landowners realize that sheet erosion is just as detrimental to the soil resource as the easily visible gully erosion.

A substantial county-wide increase in conservation tillage could greatly benefit the farming community and the environment. Conservation tillage will work and it can save money. And without a doubt it does save soil!

* A no-till clinic/tour is scheduled to be on June 6, 1990 from 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. at the Bob Utter farm located three miles east of Columbus Jct. on Hwy. 92. More information on this tour is forthcoming.

Submitted by Wendell Jones
District Conservationist