

Farmers judge first major no-till season

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Initial results of the "We're Not Going To Plow Our Fields This Year" experiment in no-till farming are mixed, according to Iowa farmers and officials.

Some producers are sold on the subject as recent converts to a new religion. Others are still hunting for a catch buried amid the fine print. Still others may wash their hands of the whole thing next year.

"Overall no-till is doing well, although I think there are a lot of discouraged people out there who might blame low yields on no-till instead of on trying something different in an odd season," said Brian Lang, a crop production expert with Iowa State University's Extension Service.

Minimum tillage practices, reducing the amount of plowing done on a field before and after planting, have grown steadily in popularity the last 10 years.

But the number of acres where seeds were planted into undisturbed earth increased mightily this year, pushed by the government and Mother Nature.

Farmers have until 1995 to begin soil conservation practices, keeping dirt on the fields instead of in the creekbeds or wind gusts, or they will be locked out of government money

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Jesup Farmer

programs. That interest in complying with the conservation rules was augmented by an early winter storm last year that ended tillage work prematurely.

Fields left alone throughout the winter experienced a lower level of soil erosion. Last spring they were ready for farmers experimenting with no-till practices.

And experiment they did.

In Black Hawk County, an estimated 41,000 acres were planted into leftover stalks and stubble, according to the Soil Conservation Service. That's about 15 percent of the total acres planted in the county and four times the number of no-till acres planted in 1991.

Across the state, about 900,000 no-till acres were planted in 1991 and nearly three times that amount was planted this year, according to Soil Conservation Service officials.

Most farmers say they confined their experiment to a few acres.

But not Richard Seehase. After reviewing his plans for three years, the Jesup farmer went cold-turkey this year, planting his entire 270 acres of corn and soybeans into undisturbed fields.

"I'm going to stay with it," he said recently. "I'm going to put something back into the soil that we've always taken away. Someday land is going to be at a premium and if we can make it last and survive — then that's what we should do."

Seehase said he's expecting lower yields this year compared to previous harvests, but he's still making money because of fewer plowing passes before planting — something to consider with local corn prices expected to stay around \$1.80 per bushel throughout the harvest. Agricultural organizations say producers need

prices of \$2.30 to \$2.50 per bushel to make a profit.

Yields on the Black Hawk County Corn Grower's no-till test plot near La Porte City averaged 193 bushels per acre. The Buchanan County plot averaged 186 bushels per acre.

Seehase said he's content with the lower yields because he figures he saved time and money during the planting season.

"No-till won't increase the yield," he said. "That's the hardest part to get through to people, but it gives you a return on the money, plus giving something back to the land."

"I'm making money, that's the bottom line. If you always make a profit, you're always going to be farming," Seehase said. "You don't have to make 200 bushels (per acre) ... although it'd be nice. Bragging rights are always nice."

Others are not content with the lower yields. Marv Haugebak, a Cedar Falls farmer, said he lost corn yields worth about \$50 an acre using no-till. "I'm not going to try it again," he said. "I'll do conservation tillage, but not no-till."

The lure of high yields — and the peer pressure to get them — are obstacles to the expansion of no-till farming. But experts say they are easily surmounted.

"I keep telling them not to worry

(about low yields)," said Gary Schulz, the agronomy manager at the La Porte City Co-op. "It's just the year."

A parched spring followed by a cool, wet summer played havoc with the growing season across the state. Corn plants were late poking out of the ground. Herbicides didn't work the way they were intended.

And many farmers now are harvesting corn killed by frost before it was fully mature.

But what some farmers plan to abandon, many others are preparing to try. Tired of explaining his tillage, seed and herbicide decisions to neighbors for hours at a time, Seehase put up signs in his fields for the curious to ponder.

Field days reviewing no-till farming have been well attended throughout the summer. And officials say they expect continued interest in conservation farming as 1995 approaches and the trend becomes more commonplace.

"You're not just changing the planting scheme, you're changing the whole tillage program," said Lang, the Extension crop expert. "You're not going to till. You're changing the whole herbicide systems to control weeds. Farmers had enough new things to learn without dealing with the season."