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FROM THE OUTDOORS

by Steve Yaddof

A revolution is going on in America's farmland. Fortunately for all of us, it is a quiet revolution. That revolution is the switch to conservation tillage.

Conservation tillage is a farming practice that allows farmers the alternative of planting their crops in fields that have not been plowed. It makes use of crop residue or other forms of land cover to reduce erosion and saves moisture for crops being grown.

According to the definition by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service, conservation tillage is any crop planting system where 30 percent or more of crop residue remains on the surface after planting. Many tillage forms and options are available to farmers.

The use of conservation tillage saves farmers time, money and fuel; and can reduce erosion by up to 90 percent. In many parts of the country, conservation tillage in one form or another is a household word, but in some areas it is just getting started. In some areas conservation tillage has been used for over two decades. It is rapidly gaining converts. The U.S. Department of Agriculture predicts that by the year 2000, more than 80 percent of America's farmers will be using some form of conservation tillage.

According to an article in the May-June 1985 issue of the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, farmers in the Corn Belt and the Lake States lead the nation with conservation tillage. In fact, 42 percent of America's farmers using conservation tillage are in the Corn Belt, 16 percent in the Lake States, 15 percent in the Northern Plains, and 8 percent in the Appalachian region. Surprisingly, only 1 percent in the Delta.

Based on findings of the USDA's Farm Production Expenditure Survey (FPES), about one-fifth of the nation's farmers have adopted conservation tillage. This practice is used primarily to grow corn, soybeans, and small grain. Of America's crops grown under conservation tillage, 50 percent of the average were corn, and 35 percent soybeans. Researchers are studying the use of conservation tillage on many other crops including potatoes, peanuts, cotton, tomatoes and other truck crops.

Soil and water conservation is the prime reason farmers adopt conservation tillage, but cost and time savings were equally important. In addition, the adoption of conservation tillage

in 1983 was mostly done without the aid of any governmental cost-sharing.

Systems range from the top conservation practices, no-till to various forms of minimum or reduced tillage. The type of conservation tillage used depends largely upon knowledge of local technology and customs, soils, weed control, and needs of individual farms. The bottom line for most farmers to know is that the conservation system suitable for their type of operation is available. Farmers can learn more about conservation tillage from several sources, including contacting the USDA's Soil Conservation Service or the local office of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Many land grant colleges offer farmers an opportunity to view conservation tillage systems at field days, field trials, and other outreach activities. In recent years, farm magazines have been inundated with articles about the pros and cons of conservation tillage. Agribusiness such as equipment and chemical dealers also have materials available.

Many farmers have learned a great deal about conservation tillage by asking neighbors who have made it work on their own farms. Many organizations sponsor tours, demonstrations, and field trials, including local soil and water conservation districts.

A big help to growers interested in seeking information is the Conservation Tillage Information Center (CTIC) located in Fort Wayne, IN. CTIC is a joint project of the National Association of Conservation Districts, agribusinesses, governmental agencies, private organizations, and individual farmers. The Center provides newsletters, information materials and resource references.

In the May 1985 issue of "No-Till Farmer", Editor Frank Lessiter commented that the most limiting factor holding back more wide spreading adoption of conservation tillage is simply an attitude problem. Regardless of the current financial environment in agriculture, once people are fully sold on the benefits of conservation tillage, especially no-till, they will change and adopt the system.

Yes, American agriculture has undergone many revolutions, but many experts agree that conservation tillage is the most rapidly spreading practice since the adoption of hybrid seed corn. Conservation tillage may be a quiet revolution throughout America, but it is growing, and it is here stay.