

Struggling with the no-till farming option

By ROSE LIDDELL
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If John Deere could hear the Soil Conservation Service praise no-till farming today, he would probably launch an all-out marketing campaign to save his plow.

After all, the general idea of no-till farming is to plow less and leave pieces of the crop in the field to protect the soil from wind and rain erosion.

Since Iowa leads the nation in the soil erosion problem, the federal government is trying to encourage and convince Iowa farmers to till their fields less and keep some kind of cover on the land to avoid run-off.

Most farmers really have no other choice than to begin conservation tillage and other forms of soil preservation farming techniques, says Roy Campbell, SCS district conservationist in Waterloo.

The 1985 Food Security Act states farmers working highly erodable land have until 1990 to have a conservation plan and until 1995 to get the plan working, or they become ineligible for federal assistance.

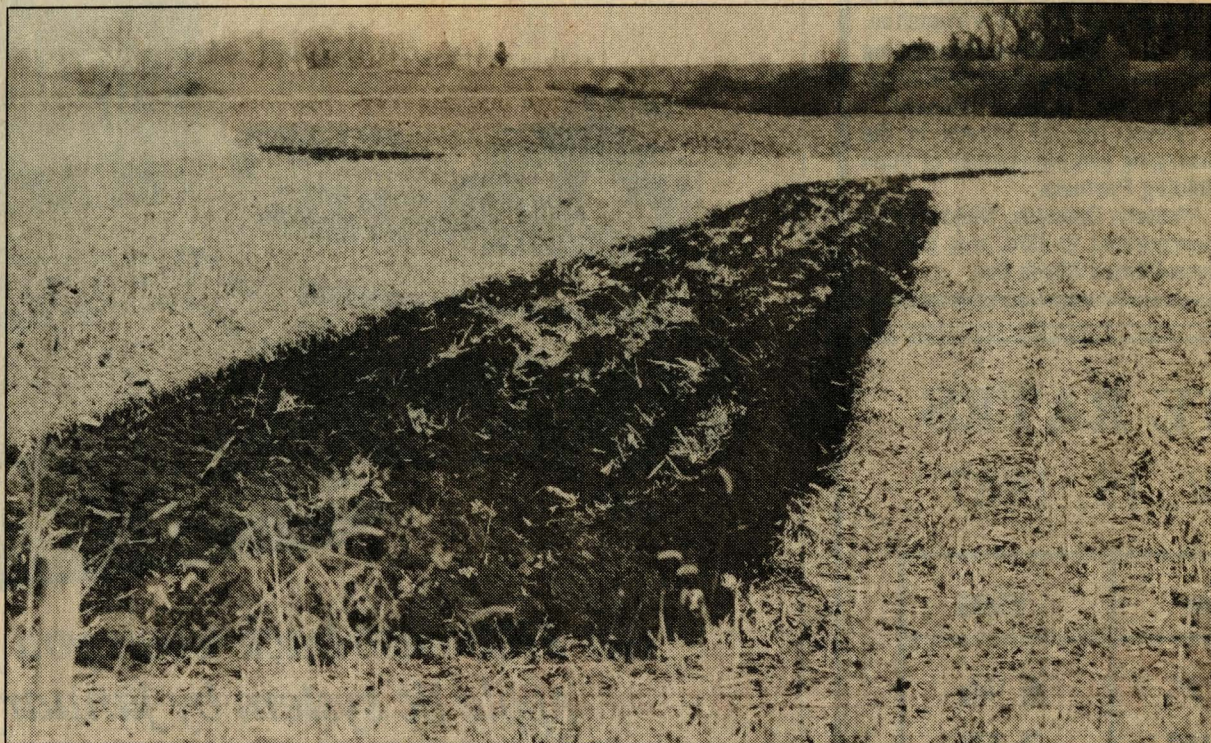
About 60 percent of the U.S. cropland has little or no erosion problem, and severe erosion occurs on less than 10 percent of the farmland — but much of that land is in Iowa.

"But in our area, just because we have criteria to determine what is highly erodable or isn't, it still might need conservation treatment even if it isn't determined highly erodable," Campbell said.

SOME FACTORS ARE influencing farmers beyond any SCS encouragement.

In Grundy County, for example, a majority of the corn grown there is for seed companies, which want the farmers to till their land.

"There is soil erosion in Grundy County and the severity varies from location to location, and I'm a little concerned this year because with the nice weather there's an awful lot more tillage taking place this fall," said George Kadrmas, Iowa State University Extension director in



Courier Photo by DAN NIERLING

To till or not to till? That's the question many farmers are asking themselves this fall. They have to have a plan filed by 1990 to cut tillage. The strip of land tilled

in the middle is exposed to the elements, opening it up to erosion, while that on the sides is protected by crop residue.

Grundy County.

Kadrmas said most people don't understand the soil erosion problem because it isn't always visible.

"If you can't see it from a distance, you tend to think it's not there," he said. "It is there, but they don't see a need to do anything about it."

The practice of no-till farming involves leaving all or part of the crop residue in the field during the fall and winter months to avoid wind erosion, and to make sure some type of cover is on the fields from mid-April to early June to protect from rain erosion.

"It's critical to have that residue and that is the rationale — we want to continue to get people to stop turning the field black," Campbell said.

No-till also preserves moisture in the soil. But it has been known to be a haven for weeds and insects, so more herbicides and pesticides have to be used on the land.

Conservation tillage usually leaves at least 30 percent of the old crop residue on the soil surface at planting. Campbell said conventional tillage today requires fewer passes than in the past; sometimes a farmer will follow the combine with a moldboard plow, then have one secondary tillage pass in the spring. Normal tillage can require five passes with tillage equipment.

LARRY LOENSER, ISU Extension director for Black Hawk County, said no-till farming, or conservation tillage, is growing in popularity here.

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any of their yields.

However, some farmers believe that since the soil temperatures are lower during planting time if no-till farming is practiced, their yields will suffer.

"More people try it all the time," Campbell said. "We have programs that are an incentive at least in demonstrative terms where someone can get \$10 per acre for 40 acres

over a period of three years from the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service."

Campbell said the program is directed toward the beginning no-tiller who is willing to try various soil preservation techniques. He added that contour tilling and in-row planting also can help curb the erosion problem.

"No-till is not rare — there's quite a bit of no-till farming done each year in Black Hawk County," Loenser said.

Loenser said there's less expense to no-till farming, since there are fewer runs through the field and therefore less wear and tear on the machinery.

Some of the problems with the no-till method include cooler soil temperatures in the spring, which can delay planting, and a difficulty getting fertilizer into the crop root zone without disturbing the residue, which limits the fertilizer's effect.

Campbell said efficient no-till techniques can save farmers as much as 5 percent without reducing

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