

# No-till eases strain on input costs

Heralded across the Plains for years as a savior of soil and moisture, no-till crop production is helping producers save in two areas that have become additionally challenging as of late: input costs and labor.

Brian Olson, K-State Extension agronomist at Colby, Kan., estimates at least 95 percent of producers across northwest Kansas are using no-till for their dryland corn, soybeans, sunflower and milo crops. A growing number of dryland wheat producers also are turning to continuous no-till, and under irrigation more and more acres are being converted to strip-till or no-till to conserve moisture and cut fuel use.

"No-till saves a lot of fuel," says Bob Wagner, Kensington,

whose father started experimenting with minimum-tillage practices in the late 60s. About four years ago, his family's 2,500-acre sunflower, milo and wheat operation went 100 percent no-till. "Even when we were minimum-till, we used to rip our soils every three or four years because of the clay content and the need to break up compaction.

## Side-lining fuel guzzler

"Now, the 4-wheel drive tractor sits in the shed, and we've eliminated the 3/4-gallon-per-acre fuel bill." On-road diesel averaged more than \$4 per gallon in mid-August—an increase of more than 200 percent since 2005. Cutting out the deep tillage is definitely saving money.

In addition to sidelining his family operation's 4-wheel drive, no-till farming has minimized Wagner's equipment needs overall. The crop equipment includes a no-till drill, no-till planter, a dry floater for fertilizer application, tractors and a sprayer—perhaps the most important component, Wagner believes.

"The sprayer is critically important for weed control in no-till," says the experienced producer. "There is usually a narrow window to get good weed control, and everyone needs spraying done at the same time. I want to be in control of herbicide application timing, so I need a sprayer that is ready to go when I am ready to spray."

At one time, Wagner relied on

a 1,800-gallon floater to meet his weed-control challenges. But, compaction-prone soils soon sent telltale signs that a change was needed.

"We were getting a lot of compaction with the floater. It took 10 gallons of water per acre to run, and it was heavy," Wagner said. Yield reductions and erosion-prone areas across the fields were red flags. "So, we started looking for a smaller machine with a narrow track." Simplicity, fuel efficiency, good road speed, reasonable first cost and automatic guidance were also features on his shopping list.

## Guidance accuracy delivers savings

Several models were com-

pared, but Wagner settled on a 7650 Series Spra-Coupe. The 725-gallon, 2-wheel-drive machine is diesel powered and allows him to cover around 150 acres per fill. With all fields within six miles of the farm headquarters, Wagner generally returns to home base to fill the sprayer. Chemicals are purchased in bulk, which helps lower cost plus eliminates bags and jugs. The sprayer also is equipped with a guidance system, which Wagner believes is another key to cutting costs and improving efficiencies.

"I absolutely wouldn't operate any sprayer without a guidance system. It's a must," the operator says. "The system helps you save time and save chemical because you know where you are. Your application rate is accurate because the system helps you prevent skips and overlaps. And, you're not burning fuel making unnecessary trips around the field." He points out that the cost of some chemicals has nearly tripled over the past year, so crop protection chemicals are too expensive to waste.

## No-till, one-man show

Greg Simpson of Ransom, Kan., also is a big believer in the soil and water saving benefits of no-till, as his father ventured into the practice in the early 70s. Today, he appreciates the ability it gives him to cut fuel and labor costs.

Other than help planting and harvesting the milo, this wheat and milo producer is essentially a one-man show, farming about 2,000 acres of rolling west central Kansas land.

"I farm 2,000 acres, but because of multiple applications for fertilizer, fungicides and herbicides, I may spray 8,000 to 10,000 acres per year," Simpson relates. And, he covers the acres by himself without additional labor—an important factor as quality help is harder to find in rural areas than ever.

"I pretty much have worked to the point I'm a one-person operation," he adds.

A reliable "right size" sprayer and the equipment to keep the sprayer in the field are essential components of his operation.

"Some people think the way to cover more ground is with a larger sprayer. As you do that, the machine gets heavier and compaction becomes a problem. You especially compound the problem when soils are damp," Simpson explains. "I prefer a 700- to 800-gallon sprayer with an 80- or 90-foot boom. This size machine lets me cover 110 to 130 acres per hour."

Simpson uses a semi-tractor with a drop-deck trailer to haul not only his Spra-Coupe self-propelled sprayer but also a 3,000-gallon nurse tank and chemicals.

"In this situation, I can fill the sprayer several times and work all day unless I'm applying higher gallons," Simpson says. "Because I can do the spraying myself, I avoid the cost of hiring help. Even though I may spray a field four times a year, when I'm running 120 to 130 acres per hour and burning about 5 gallons of fuel during that time, fuel is not a big expense compared to tillage."

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