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University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Gage County
Paul Hay, Extension Educator • 1115 West Scott Street • Beatrice NE 68310 • (402) 223-1384
website: <http://gage.unl.edu> • email: phay1@unl.edu
<http://www.facebook.com/UNLExtensionGageCo> • <https://twitter.com/#!/UNLExtensionGage>

BRIEF HISTORY OF SOIL CONSERVATION IN GAGE COUNTY

Driving around the county the last two springs looking at various field problems has really impressed me. I refuse to focus on the severe damages to fields from the recent heavy rains. I am instead focusing on the tremendous soil savings from the growing acres of no-till. Let's compare: A few years ago the Francis and George Goin took me to a mass of wire and rock in a field north of Barneston. It was the top of a CCC wire and rock gully stopper structure 18 feet deep. What was life like here in the 1930s? That gives a glimpse. Soil loss estimates were 20 tons per acre per year.

At lunch in Wilber some years back with a group of farmers was a fond memory discussion of listers, including the famous Dempster model made right here in Beatrice. As each farmer shared the glory of the lister and the drawbacks of those dreaded top planters, I dreaded my where I would likely pull a "Hay Stunt" and disagree. I was saved the task by Arlen Pieper, whose memory of the lister and throwing out, and throwing in, was a bit different then the stories we had heard. Arlen said he recalled hand replanting the washed out listed rows, then burying the young corn starting there with the throwing. This ensured a nice smooth flat gully for run-off

to flow down the hills. Bless the top planters. Soil loss estimates were 15 tons per acre per year.

The Soap Creek Lutheran Church Men's Group asked me to present information on conservation. After the program, over cookies and coffee, Fritz Niemeyer told me of his early experiences with terraces. Fritz said lots of people cussed them (still do today), but he kind of liked them. "You start in along the terrace, you go around the hill and see quite a bit of country, then you turn around and end up right back where you started from. It's easy!" I also remember a few stories where the combine was full and a wrong turn left the farmer on the wrong side of the hill walking back to the truck. Soil loss estimates were 10 tons per acre per year.

The disk and field cultivator introduced us to the idea of actually leaving some residue on the surface. We know from the start that soil structure and health were being hurt, but the improvement over plow and erode was impressive for the time. If we could stomach the times when rains cleared the fields to the disk rills, it was a better time. Abuse was evident, like the old 12-foot disk parked in the field corner and buried in four years beyond the hubs by a doubtful tenant and a huge disk. Soil loss estimates were 8 tons per acre per year.

Tile outlet terraces are eliminating water way ditch maintenance. Buffer strips of grass are placing permanent cover along fragile stream banks. No-till farming is keeping a vital carbon residue on the soil surface like a protective blanket, stilling the tragic loss of soil organic matter to tillage and erosion. Soil health and structure are on the mend and yields are on the increase. Farmers are still not satisfied with the soil losses occurring. There is always more to be done. Soil loss estimates are 2.5 tons per acre per year. In 2012, a very hot dry year, no-till corn yields we 65 bushel per acre while tilled ground yielded 20 bushel per acre. That is the value of residue cover and added organic matter in our soils. The conservation spirit of our farmers blesses Gage County. Let's hope the tradition continues.

For more information e-mail Paul C Hay at phay1@unl.edu, call 402-223-1384, or visit the News Column University of Nebraska Extension local Website: gage.unl.edu, Twitter: @Cloverhay



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