



January 27, 2012

SALINA CONFERENCE REPORT

The No-till on the Plains Conference had 1,400 attendees go through the door last week so they had a very successful meeting in terms of attendance and continue to outgrow their facility. It was a good regional, two-day meeting where I assisted with 27 producers from Gage, Jefferson, Lancaster and Saline County that pooled rides and traveled down together. There is something invigorating about traveling with a group of farmers that are talking about improving their operations and taking conservation to greater heights. The main theme was increasing soil quality.

By increasing soil quality, good things can happen such as higher yields, higher water holding capacity of the soil, higher organic carbon (soil organic matter), better soil structure for root development, better nutrient cycling, and a more active soil community of living organisms.

Dr. Duane Beck from the Dakota Lakes research is always good and quite opinionated. He challenged producers what their farm would look like in 50 years, 100 years, 600 years, etc. If it is more fertilizer, more herbicides, more insecticides, more seed treatments, more inputs, he calls that the “moron principle.” Basically he was challenging producers to think longer-term. He said we are mining our phosphorus and exporting it to both coasts and now we are at the tipping point of one half of our world phosphate reserves used up.

Weeds and diseases are Mother Nature’s way of adding diversity to a system that lacks it. Add beneficial diversity in crop rotations to decrease problems. Pesticide use decreases diversity. Beck says no-till farming is just one tool farmers can use to help manage the ecosystem. He says people spend too much time focusing on small details and miss the bigger picture. Are we going after the cause of a problem or simply always treating symptoms? If tillage is so good in eliminating weeds, then all the weeds would be gone by now.

Jill Clapperton, a soil microbiologist, indicated that soil biology drives the whole system forward. Earthworms are Mother Nature’s plow to aerate. Just like the movie, “if you build it, they will come.” We have a long ways to understand the community of organisms in soils. The farmers that attended from our area indicated they were interested in trying cover crops to enhance diversity and further stabilize erosion on areas of fields. There is no one recipe or silver bullet. There was a lot of interest in seeding rye in a corn or soybean stubble or a cover crop after wheat versus chemical fallow.

I must say I heard an entirely opposite, new idea that happened from a producer in Southeast Nebraska who had contacted their local county assessor’s office. They could not understand why property taxes should increase on land where yields were becoming more of a problem and too many ditches were developing. They explained to the assessor why this land should not be taxed as much because the soil is eroding away and the yield capability is now lower. Let me get this straight, soil loss was so bad because of management practices, it deserved lower taxes? The assessor didn’t change anything.



Continuing to watch land erode away to the point the next profit center is to somehow decrease taxes is a real problem. It's up to us how we leave the soil quality and land for future generations.

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