

Farmer involvement called key to zero-till research

by Laura Rance

Western Producer Newsfeature Service

Agriculture minister Charlie Mayer says continued farmer involvement is key to the success of Manitoba's newest research facility, the Manitoba Zero Tillage Research Farm, opened recently near the town of Forrest. It is run by farmers with an interest in soil conservation.

"You get research that's directly applicable and transferable," Mayer said.

"When you have some input as a farmer as to what should be done here it's going to be a lot more relative and a lot easier to use." Besides, "it's a lot easier to lever money or raise money as a farmer or commodity organization if you've got some similar money on the table," Mayer said.

Robert Stevenson, chair of the Manitoba Zero Tillage Research Association that set up the farm, said the group believes farmers need to have a more direct role in agricultural research.

Aside from the fact that government coffers are empty, "if we are to have our questions answered, we have to be involved in the management and financing," he said.

Stevenson, 38, has used zero-tillage on his western Manitoba grain and legume farm for most of his farming career. But he's among a growing group of longtime zero-tillers who are worried about the lack of research into important questions over the system's viability.

"I see problems arising that in my opinion, are a threat to whether I can continue with zero-till," he said. While the system has proven benefits in conservation, "we need a lot more research and a lot more answers if we are going to take full benefit of that."

Issues such as weed control, herbicide resistance and crop rotations continue to plague zero-tillage farmers just as they do conventional farmers, he said.

As a farmer, he's looking for options to expand traditional crop rotations either in the form of new varieties, new crops or new management practices.

Robert McNabb, one of the co-founders of the Manitoba farm, said an important component of the research there will be how to integrate livestock and forage into a cropping rotation under zero tillage.

"If we're talking about sustainable agriculture, we have to include livestock," McNabb said. "There are simply too many acres of land on the Prairies which have no logical function other than supporting animals."

Jim Elliott, dean of the faculty of agriculture at the University of Manitoba, said the farm could form a vital link between farmers and the research community.

It will allow ideas developed at the university research plots to be tested not only under field-scale conditions, but for how they fit into a whole farm operation.

"In the past, the research that farmers have been interested in are really the problems they have in the barnyard and on the farm today," he said. "The university's role I think is doing longer term research, trying to predict what the future is and plan and develop the systems or the crops or the machinery that might be needed 15 to 20 years from now.

"There's always been a bit of a dichotomy between those two things that hasn't come together," he said. "These days I think they are beginning to come closer and closer together."

But Elliott worries too much emphasis will be placed on short-term research at the expense of primary research conducted at universities.

"There's only so much money to fund research and they (government) are pushing more and more of this on industry." If industry supports one, it may not support the other, he said.

Copyright © 1993 *REAP Canada*