

**Stay out of the coffee shop and 29 other tips to remember if
implementing a minimum tillage system this spring**

by Susanne J. Brown

There isn't one, simple, perfect answer to the question of how to successfully switch from conventional cropping practices to a ridge-till or no-till system. But the best advice, would be to stay out of the coffee shops, according to six veteran minimum tillage farmers talking to 600 farmers attending the 1994 Innovative Farmers No-Till/Ridge-Till Workshop held in Etobicoke recently.

A long term decision to convert to a reduced tillage system shouldn't be based on the opinions of one year experts who are resting on their laurels, they concluded.

The veteran farm panel, with at least 84 years in combined experience in minimum tillage, consisted of: Don Lobb, a no-till farmer-researcher from central Huron County, Doug Smith, a Thamesville area ridge-till farmer-researcher, Bruce Shillinglaw, a Londesboro no-till farmer, Bob Hart a minimum tillage farmer from the Woodstock area, Jack McGregor a ridge-till farmer from Clinton, and Jack Rigby, a minimum tillage farmer.

Other tips the farm panel suggested to those considering a reduced tillage system were:

- "Have a positive attitude even if things don't go exactly as planned."
- "Seek advice, listen and always try harder."
- "When trying a new idea, reduce the risk and expense by starting out small. Try it in one field instead of on the whole farm."
- "Take notes and keep records. Write things down so an evaluation can be done year to year."
- "Don't make major decisions based on one year's results."
- "Be flexible. If it rains, it's not the end of the world. Things will get done, if not now then later."
- "Adopt a complete conservation system instead of simply ridge-till or no-till. The rest of the system is just as important as the tillage."

Weed control

- "Don't broadcast fertilizer. It's a waste of time because you are feeding the weeds when you should only be providing nutrients to the crop's roots."
- "Put more crops into the rotation to reduce disease and insect problems."
- "Get help to control weeds. The three-year pressure from annuals will go down, but don't relent once they are out of sight, or else the battle will be worse in the following year."
- "Use burn-down in the first few years when making the switch to a minimum tillage system. It will be a big mistake that will cost in the long run if a burn-down is skipped."
- "Don't use 2,4-D as a burn-down before planting soybeans. It will reduce yields and isn't registered for use as a burn-down."

Machinery hints

- "Replace worn parts on machinery. The job isn't being done properly if the machinery isn't working to full capacity."
- "Keep bands wide while learning how to cultivate. Then, and only then, narrow the bands once the practice of cultivating has been mastered."
- "Don't be in a hurry to get into a field. Wait until it is fit to plant. If ruts are made, the field is ruined for the next crop."
- "Control traffic. Planting areas don't mix with driving areas. Treat the two areas differently."
- "Hang extra equipment on the planter to facilitate planting. In a minimum tillage system there has to be enough weight on the planter for it to penetrate the ground."
- "Use bias ply tires instead of radial tires in a ridge-till system. They have less traction, but are cheaper and will flatten out in the valley between the ridges."

Fertilizer & soil needs

- "Inject below the surface a minimum of 40 pounds of nitrogen in the starter fertilizer."
- "Band all phosphorus and potassium with fertilizer so it is readily available to the plant."
- "Soil test a number of times. Instead of using a probe, take a 30 inch slice because if you miss the band you will get an artificially low result."
- "To be reactive to soil climates, rely on local information instead of information coming out of the States."

Crop management

- "Scout fields personally and regularly. A number of changes are always taking place in ridge-till and no-till fields."
- "Do your own on-farm trials to select seed varieties. Establish which will work on your farm under your specific conditions."
- "Avoid cover crops when starting into a minimum tillage system. Perfect the rest of the system first, then add cover crops to the rotation."
- "Don't chop corn stalks in a no-till system. It will slow the drying and warming of the soil in the spring."
- "Do chop corn stalks in a ridge-till system. It will leave the ridges bare and will slow water movement in the valley between the ridges."

"Manage corn residue. Either remove it or incorporate it."

And perhaps the best piece of advice from the farm panel: "don't be afraid to try something different. If farmers are going to prosper in the year 2000, they have to be willing to change."

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