

Farming without residue: Putting civilization on collision course with extinction

by Susanne J. Brown

If Robert McNabb, a no-till farmer from Minnedosa, Manitoba has his way, history won't be allowed to repeat itself.

McNabb is on a crusade to convince all farmers to convert to sustainable agriculture in an effort to stop soil erosion.

Perhaps trying to convert those already devoted to minimum tillage methods when he addressed over 400 farmers as the after dinner speaker at the 1994 No-Till, Ridge-Till Workshop in Etobicoke recently, McNabb still made a point of driving home the message of the need for producers to develop a strong conservation ethic.

"Canada's most productive land loses in excess of five tonnes per year of topsoil to erosion," stated McNabb. And "in Zimbabwe, which has a development period of similar length to North America, present losses of topsoil are 25 tonnes per acre per year due to erosion."

"All trends in history show that civilized man has despoiled most of the land on which he has lived for long. Wars between civilizations started because man wanted more land after he had ruined his own," McNabb lobbied.

Historical records show time and time again how civilized man ruined his environment by depleting or destroying all natural resources, cutting down or burning most of the valuable timber, overgrazing the grasslands that fed livestock, killing most of the wildlife and fish, permitting erosion to rob farmland of its productive topsoil, allowing eroded soil to clog the streams, fill reservoirs, irrigation canals and harbors with silt, he said.

Sound familiar?

"Think about it. It is possible that we are on a collision course leading to extinction comparable to past civilizations," said McNabb.

"The fate of our civilization is sealed unless we develop a strong conservation ethic," he said. "It is therefore obvious that farmers, as the primary producers, have a very important role to play in the development of a truly sustainable agriculture."

The depletion of soil must be stopped and the soil building process must be allowed to operate naturally, he stated.

And "learning to farm with residue is undoubtedly the cornerstone for the development of a truly sustainable agriculture," McNabb concluded.

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