

CTF/No Till Farming 2008 – What Have we Learned and Where to from Here?

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This is a CTF conference but I would like to say there is more to the crop production process than just CTF. The way we practise farming today has to be a systems approach; if we leave some parts out we will not get the best out of our farming, or even worse, the system will fail and we will go back to our bad old ways.

Everyone looks at change and some people try some change but too many leave out some of the most important parts to make the system complete. There seem to be too many people out there that challenge the very farmers that are leading the way and these farmers are the ones that have the experiences and have learnt the hard way (the school of hard knocks). Some farmers' consultants and agronomists seem hell bent on stopping the adoption of new farming systems. Why is this so? There seems to be so much confusion out there at the moment and everyone seems to want to put their own slant on the system to add more confusion.

It has taken many years to get where we are today and at times it has been hard work and mentally very challenging to work all the necessary interconnecting aspects out but now the system just flows and it all seems just too easy. Sometimes I look back at the things we did along the way and I have to laugh at myself and the stupid things we did and the procrastinating over such little issues, e.g. row spacings, press wheels, what seeding point. If only I could have gone straight to our current system, but my ignorance and the people around me saying that it will not work, would not let us.

One of the main things to come out of all this change is motivation of farmers. Agriculture is now at a very exciting stage for us all. Where it goes from here we will have to wait and see, but I am sure there will be more change and advancements along the way.

The system has to be complete. We have to get our soils into better condition and to do this we need to :

A Stop bashing the shit out of our soils (No-Till/Zero-Till)

This is the most important part of the system; we need to keep improving the soil by letting the soil work for us. I see it on our farm, the longer we go on doing No-Till/Zero-Till the better the soil becomes and the higher the yields of our crops become.

Disc seeders are much better at placing seed in the soil with minimal soil disturbance. To achieve this we have to plant our crops on wider row spacing's (less soil bashing). The ability to seed between the last years residue is just too important and beneficial to the environment that our new crop is growing in, the protection from mother nature's elements is invaluable.

People say we need narrow rows to get ground cover to stop weeds growing, well what is last year's residue doing? Just the same thing if kept standing.

It is sometimes difficult to convince farmers to increase their row spacings, agronomists, neighbours and many so-called experts say you cannot do it but these people have seldom followed through on long term No-Till/Zero-Till practices, so how do they know?

B We have to stop driving all over our paddocks

If we continue to drive wherever we think we need to with our big fat tractors we are compacting the whole field and the improvement in the soil just stops right there. The hard pan caused by wheel tracks was called a seed bed. This must be eliminated for soil and plant health to improve.

Auto steer, well we don't use this technology to just drive straight or do we? Auto steer is a fantastic tool to make CTF work even better, with CTF and wider row spacing's we can successfully inter row seed every crop every year. If we control our traffic the soil that doesn't get driven on just seems to get better and better as time goes by.

The better the soil becomes the more we see compaction as a major issue but we only see it now because we have stopped driving on it and the soils are un-compacting as time goes by. Compaction just costs us money where ever we look, crop yield, more fuel, extra HP required to do the same job etc.

C Weed control

Well we all know about weed control don't we or do we?

Using the system that we currently use greatly improves the weed control program, we still have weeds but to a much lesser amount with a lot more options to control them.

Wider row spacing's allow for better penetration of herbicides, we get the chemical to the target with a lot less loss.

The ability to band spray herbicides and fungicides reducing cost on our pockets as well as the environment in the process.

The ability to include a shroud sprayer in the weed control process is just another tool and is only possible with wider row spacing's.

The main benefit of all this change?

- Growing more grain with less input and less water!
- Our fertilizer rates have decreased by half and at the same time growing more grain.
- Our water use efficiencies have doubled and there is good reason for that to happen.

I hope the improvements keep coming without much more change as I need a rest. I am sure the soil will just keep getting better the more residue we put back in and the yields will keep going up hence repeating the cycle.

We can only reap the rewards if we work with our soil rather than trying to subdue it with road building practices.

So stop bashing and compacting your soils and enjoy the ride!