

Observations on farmer attitudes to CTF in Canada and North and South Dakota, as gleaned from the 6th World Congress on Conservation Agriculture and post-conference tour, June 2014

Annieka Paridaen

Southern Farming Systems, 23 High St Inverleigh VIC 3321, aparidaen@sfs.org.au

After spending six weeks in the USA and Canada, I can attest that ‘travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer’. From an agricultural perspective, gaining an understanding of farming systems by meeting farmers and researchers on the other side of the world was an invaluable experience and has given me a lot to think about on my return. The focus of my trip was to gain insight into the role that no-till, rotations and livestock play in other farming systems, with a particular interest in the use of cover crops instead of fallow to build a resilient system. This interaction is recognised as Conservation Agriculture (CA), a brand that is worn by many with pride. The three key principles to abide by are 1) minimum mechanical soil disturbance, 2) protecting soil with cover and 3) diversity in the rotation (more than two crop types). An unofficial principle is the integration of livestock into a farming system and is deemed to be a very important element, which is definitely not the case in Australia.

The wide adoption of ‘Conservation Agriculture’ which is based on a no-till system had me thinking that controlled traffic and use of precision technology was a given, but it seems overseas they are not quite there, some even saying the controlled traffic phase has been and gone and won’t work in their environment. A lot of progressive North American farmers look to Australia for updates on how we are using technology like guidance, yield monitor, NDVI and making system changes like controlled traffic on tramlines. Australian farmers are world leaders when it comes to innovation and application of technology on farm and we shouldn’t forget that!

Farmer attitudes

Is it a lack of education or a lack of proof from their own backyard that has seen the ‘denial’ of controlled traffic in North America? Some of the attitudes that stood out to me are listed below and will be covered in more detail.

- Compaction is not a big concern due to freeze and thaw of soil across seasons
- Tramlines = erosion
- Drive across as much of the paddock as possible to reduce compaction
- Do the benefits outweigh the costs especially on my small farm?

Most farmers around the world have great respect for their soil. They understand that if it is treated right, it will repay the favour. Do soils in North America behave that differently to Australian soils or are we making excuses for our respective environments because we don’t fully understand them? Perhaps we are baffled by the lack of uptake of CTF in North America, but who is to say that we aren’t missing an obvious factor that others see as common sense? Learning from others, other parts of Australia to other parts of the world is how we progress. Have an open mind!