

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Young Farmer Credits Input Savings for FT Employment

Agricultural statistics say Ben Johnson is very unusual. He is a 25-year-old full-time farmer, who doesn't need off-farm income to survive. Johnson says he's living his dream and he credits good stewardship and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for making his full-time farming dream possible.

Johnson, who has been farming three years, is a fourth-generation Plymouth County farmer. He lives in his childhood home, built by his great-grandfather. He and his wife, Janelle, grow corn, soybeans and brome grass hay on 390 acres of gently rolling land near Craig. They custom feed 4,800 head of wean-to-finish hogs and farm another 170 acres in Cherokee County.

Johnson says his grandfather, Norm Barker, 88, was a county conservation leader. Barker, also a farmer, served as a Plymouth County Soil and Water Conservation District commissioner, and still promotes conservation practices in retirement as a volunteer.

His grandfather wrote a college term paper on soil conservation practices and then built terraces and practiced contour farming on his own land, said Johnson.

"My father, Carl Johnson, learned conservation from my grandfather," said Johnson. "I learned from the two of them and also from my uncle, Jim Barker, a 100-percent no-till farmer who lives down the road."

Johnson says he is pleased to be part of a farming operation steeped in a conservation tradition. "We no-till our soybeans into standing corn. Right now we can't no-till corn into beans because we surface apply



Ben Johnson

manure using disks to move soil over the surface applied manure. The disk closers leave quite a bit of black dirt on the surface of the field. We are changing that. We plan on upgrading our manure handling equipment next year to allow for more no-till."

Hog manure is a very valuable resource to Johnson. He said at current prices he figures using manure instead of commercial fertilizer saves his operation between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year. "We knew there was value in the manure when we looked at constructing the hog buildings, but we didn't think it would be that much," Johnson said. "Manure is a better fertilizer than straight phosphorus, potassium and nitrogen fertilizer because of the organic matter."

It's a resource Johnson applies in the fall. The rest of the year he collects and stores it in manure holding facilities built by a technical service provider with the coopera-

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



tion of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and financial assistance from EQIP.

"Ben Johnson's EQIP contract requires him to follow a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) to properly store, transport and apply the hog manure on his ground," said Jim Lahn, NRCS district conservationist in Plymouth County. "NRCS helped pay a Sioux County agronomist to develop his CNMP. By following this plan, Ben protects the environment and gets the best possible fertilizer value out of his manure. This helps Ben save money on input costs."

"NRCS and EQIP made it affordable for me to put up the hog buildings," said Johnson. "Income from the hog buildings and the input savings from manure helped me become a full-time farmer soon after college and is keeping me employed on the farm."

Greg Jahn, an NRCS soil conservation technician in Plymouth County, worked on the Johnson project. "A private engineering firm designed Johnson's under-the-building manure storage facilities to NRCS and Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) standards and requirements," said Jahn. "Safety features were built into the structure to reduce the environmental risk to very near zero. The concrete structure was stress tested

for leaks. Subsurface drain tile was put around the base of the pits to prevent underground water pressure from floating the buildings or cracking the concrete."



Johnson and NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Dennis Eppling check a windbreak on Johnson's farm.

Compared to open feedlots, Jahn says Johnson's system is a big step in environmental stewardship because the manure is contained from the time it leaves the animal to the time it is properly applied to the land. He says manure storage structures like Johnson's will add immeasurably to water quality for everyone.

For information on EQIP, CNMPs and manure storage structures, please visit your local NRCS office or go to www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov.

--30--



Johnson pulls the access cap to a tile line for Dennis Eppling, an NRCS soil conservation technician. The tile line protects Johnson's manure storage facility from cracking and spilling due to underground water pressure.