

Conservation Showcase

Despite obstacles, farmer adapts, grows and protects resources

Farmers are use to standing on their own two legs – figuratively. But, as it became increasingly difficult for Gerald Davis to stand on his – literally – he did what he had done for much of his life.

He adapted.

A 64-year-old Yakima County farmer, Mr. Davis suffers from spasticity in both of his legs, a condition in which certain muscles continuously contract. This contraction causes stiffness and tightness so severe that Mr. Davis can walk only with the aid of his walker.

Unlike many of his agronomic counterparts, he no longer walks the fence line, or kicks the clods between the cultivated furrows in his field.

But in many ways Mr. Davis continues to embody the quintessential no-nonsense, “get'er done” farmer. From the seat of his four-wheel, off-road vehicle (ORV), he stays busy farming. Though instead of growing spring barley or winter wheat in a fallow rotation, he now grows grass in USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The program encourages farmers to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover, such as tame or native

grasses, wildlife plantings, trees, filter strips, or riparian buffers. Farmers receive an annual rental payment for the term of the multi-year contract.



No longer able to walk fence lines, Gerald Davis now performs many of his farming chores via his four-wheel off-road vehicle.

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especially controlling invasive weeds.”
-Sergio Paredes,
NRCS Resource Conservationist



But Mr. Davis says that he didn’t get into CRP because he wanted to stop farming. In fact, growing native species of grass and managing for invasive weeds on his 550-acre farm is a full-time farming challenge – especially because his land receives only 11 inches of precipitation a year. It’s a challenge he takes on with the same pride and intensity he did when he was farming small grains.

when the soil temperature is just right, and seed depth and soil contact is critical,” he says. “You really have to know what you’re doing and you have to be vigilant, especially controlling invasive weeds.”

To meet the exacting demands of managing CRP ground, Mr. Davis modified his farm implements – a skill he brought with him to the farm from his previous occupation as a mechanic. By adding one-inch PVC pipe to his seed drill, the ultra-light seed could be conveyed directly to the ground without the possibility of blowing in the wind. It was just one of the innovations he’s developed to more effectively manage his land.

But Mr. Davis wasn’t born a farmer. Nor did he even aspire to be one.

“When my father-in-law was ready to retire in 1974, he asked me if I’d be interested in farming,” he says. “I thought, if I didn’t like it, I could always go back to being a mechanic. And, after a while my father in law could see that I was doing it on my own,” he says.

Mr. Davis learned to be a good farmer. And his skills as a mechanic have come in handy through the years on the farm. Those skills continue to pay dividends to this day.

A few years ago he lowered the steps to his tractor. That allowed him to get into and out of the tractor more easily for several years as he continued to battle the spasticity in his legs.



Gerald Davis, left, and NRCS resource conservationist Sergio Paredes discuss invasive species weed control in a field enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Sergio Paredes, a resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) says establishing and maintaining a healthy CRP stand requires skill, tenacity and a deep understanding of agronomy. Paredes and the NRCS have been providing technical assistance to Mr. Davis since 2004.

“Getting a good stand established is difficult in these precipitation zones,” NRCS’ Paredes says. “You have to seed

These days, however, even the lower steps have their limits.

Recently, to clean up some weeds in a firebreak on his farm, Mr. Davis decided he wanted to climb into his tractor to disk an area that needed weed control. "I was trying to get up in the cab and never could get in there," he says. "I was going to try it again this morning."

It is that tenacious attitude that allows Mr. Davis to motor around his farm on his ORV with the ease and skill of a man half his age – spraying for weeds, and checking on grass stands.

But he knows his farming days are coming to an end.

The combination of the progression of his neuromuscular disorder in his lower extremities, coupled with knee problems, has all but ended his days in the tractor's cab. Regrettably, none of the treatments have yielded an improvement in his condition. So for now, Mr. Davis does what he can to grow the best grass he can in order to protect the resource base of his land and to provide critical wildlife habitat.

"The NRCS has been really good to work with throughout," he says referring to the technical assistance provided by the agency. "To be honest, there are a lot of challenges with establishing the stands. But it's just something you have to work through – you have to be willing to adapt."

Adapting is something he knows a lot about.

*Written by Ron Nichols, USDA-NRCS
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-Gerald Davis, landowner