

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*

## Technology, tenacity keeps Walla Walla producer growing with the times

**H**e had worked from sun-up to sun-down – for 26 days. Immediately after he picked up his \$26 paycheck, 14-year-old Ramon Walters went to town and bought a bicycle for exactly \$26.

He didn't have a penny left over.

“Oh my dad was mad,” recalls Mr. Walters, nearly 70 years later. “He couldn't figure out why I'd worked so hard only to blow all my money on that bicycle when I had a horse that I could ride to school,” he says.

Seven decades later, Mr. Walters doesn't regret his decision to buy that bicycle. New technology has always been something he's been willing to try.

It's why there's a state of the art, Global Positioning System and auto-steer unit in his 460 horsepower tractor. It's why he's transitioning from conventional tillage to energy and soil saving direct seed technology.

In fact, technology is the reason he chose to stay in farming from the very beginning.

Mr. Walters had to quit school to help with the farm when his three brothers went off to war in the 1940s. When one of his brothers returned home in 1945, Mr. Walters wanted



*Now in his 80s, Ramon Walters has seen significant changes in agricultural production technology – from horses to tractors, from conventional tillage to direct seeding. Thanks in part to NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Mr. Walters has been able bring soil and energy saving technology to the land he farms near Walla Walla.*

his turn to serve his country, so he joined the Navy. “I didn't see much of the world, but I saw a lot of California,” he says, recalling fondly his days in the service. “I would have stayed in the Navy if it meant coming back to farm with mules,” he says. “I hated having to take care of those mules.”

But a then-emerging technology – tractors with internal combustion engines – changed his outlook. “I called mom and dad from my station in the Navy and told them that if they

From left, Ramon Walters, NRCS' Jim Loiland, and Jon Walters discuss the issues involved in direct seeding and precision agriculture behind the Walters' 460 horsepower tractor.



switched to tractors, I'd come back," Mr. Walters says.

His dad bought a tractor. And true to his word, Mr. Walters came home. He's been farming here, taking only one vacation, ever since.

Mr. Walters' and his partner, nephew Jon Walters' operation includes three farms, covering some 2,400 acres of steep, rolling hills in central Walla Walla County, Washington. On two of the three farms, the Walters family has been renting from the same family for nearly a century.

"Today, one person can farm what would have taken four or five people and 100 head of mules to farm 40 years ago," he says.

The technology has reduced labor, but the conventional tilling equipment has also brought an unwelcomed side-effect – erosion. He could see the effect every time it rained.

"After a rain, I'd tell my daughter, 'That's our water and our fertilizer going down that ditch,'" he said. Deep down, he knew he had to do something different.

For several years, resource professionals at his local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office had been encouraging him to convert to a no-till,

direct seed operation. But like many of his neighbors, Mr. Walters wasn't entirely convinced he could make it work. Many, in fact, insisted that it wouldn't.

But a few years ago, the NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provided him the financial and technical assistance he needed to rent a no-till drill and give direct seeding a try. With nearly a century of trust between them, Mr. Walters' landlord concurred with his decision.

"We started with 300 acres of the steepest, most erodible land," he says. "Immediately we could see a difference. Our direct seed ground has almost no erosion at all."

A year later, Mr. Walters converted another 300 acres.

Direct seeding, which requires fewer implement passes over the land, is proving to be more economical than Mr. Walters initially believed. Even with an increase in the price of herbicides, the skyrocketing cost of diesel fuel is tilting the economic scales in favor of direct seeding, the younger Walters, Jon, says.

From memory, Jon rattles off the fuel input cost-per acre. Using the high tech fuel consumption data from his tractor

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and GPS unit, he knows exactly how much fuel is required per acre to disk – 0.75 gallons; spray – 0.2 gallons; chop stubble – 0.5 gallons, rod weed – 0.4 gallons; and cross cultivate – 0.6 gallons. Using direct seeding, the Walters have been able to reduce the number of passes over their fields – and correspondingly, their fuel consumption by nearly three-quarters.

Fuel savings and soil protection aside, the robust 83-year-old likes what he’s seen with his direct seeding transition. And his yields have been nearly identical to those in the conventionally tilled fields. Like some of his fellow farmers, however, Mr. Walters admits that breaking old traditions takes some getting used to.

Leaving the crop residue from the harvest “looks rough for the old timers,” Mr. Walters admits. “They’d rather see everything tilled and clean looking. But direct seed works – especially when it comes to reducing erosion,” he says. “And as one neighbor told me, ‘Once that soil comes down off the top of the hills, there’s no putting it back.’”

Interestingly, the NRCS program that jump-started his tillage operation conversion, also provided the incentive for him to take the next step in conservation farming and into the future through precision agriculture. Though he admits

he leaves most of the GPS and computer programming to his nephew, Mr. Walters is not intimidated by the technology.

That intrepid attitude may have something to do with that bicycle he bought with his



*The Walters family has been farming the rolling hills north of Walla Walla for more than a century. From left, Jon, Katy, Ramon and Debi continue the tradition.*

first paycheck all those years ago.

Because at a time in his life when most of his contemporaries prefer spending time in their rocking chairs or basking pool-side near their time-share condos, Mr. Walters continues to do what he’s done for almost all of life – farm. In three quarters of a century on the farm, he has never thought of doing anything else.

“Oh there were times when you wondered if it was worth it,” he says. “But this is what I enjoy doing – seven days a week.”

*Written and photographed by  
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