

CONSERVATION Showcase

Fuel, Fertilizer Prices Drive New Technology for Portales Farmer

To plow or not to plow, that is the question for farmers like Rick Ledbetter of Portales. The answers all stacked up on the side of conservation tillage for Ledbetter, however – resulting in production costs savings and soil improvements at the same time.

Ledbetter has always been on the cutting edge of what can be done to improve his corn-chile-wheat operation. So when fuel and fertilizer costs spiraled upward he was ready to try the conservation tillage he had dabbled in during previous years.

There are several variations of conservation tillage that may be applied depending on particular circumstances including no-till, ridge-till, and others. The particular type of conservation tillage Ledbetter settled on was strip-till.

Using equipment that cleaned a strip for seed planting while leaving wheat stubble between the rows, Ledbetter prepared the fields for planting his corn and chiles.

“I have only made four passes on the fields where I have done strip-till, while on the fields that are clean I have made six,” said Ledbetter.

The obvious result is lower fuel costs and less labor, while not so initially obvious are the better moisture retention and soil tilth improvements.

The wheat stubble acts as a mulch and helps the soil retain moisture.



And what about the soil tilth? Well, ask Scotty Savage, NRCS Portales district conservationist.

“Come back and see this soil in six years,” Savage said. “It will be a lot richer and have a lot better profile.”

The one drawback Ledbetter has identified is weed control. While he says he can use Roundup on his corn there is more of a problem with his chiles.

“One of our big problems is changing the culture,” said Savage. “There is an ethic among farmers that if you don’t keep your fields clean you are a trashy farmer. It is a matter of education that it is just good conservation and farm practice sense that we have to get across.”

Both Ledbetter and Savage see conservation tillage as the wave of the future – and great benefits to be realized in the process.

For more information about conservation tillage see the NRCS field office nearest you.