

Marathon County Success from the Field

Creative Conservation is Profitable



Shannon Nickolay, of Jerry Nickolay Farms Inc., operates a 300 cow dairy along with 1,800 acres of cropland near Stratford, Wis. Shannon custom built his own strip-till machine to use on the cool, wet soils of Marathon County; it was put to use for the first time this spring. "Adding the reduced tillage practice to their diverse rotation and cover crops, is the crowning touch on their soil health management system." said Amy Neigum, District Conservationist.

By using the strip-till implement along with GPS to plant within the 4 in. slot, Shannon was able to till up a 4 in. area without disturbing the rest of the soil between the 30 inch rows. Because it is a 12 row unit, he found there were some challenges when turning the unit on the field. He is already working on a solution for that.

The farm emphasizes profitability over production. That emphasis has led them to develop many different and creative conservation solutions. For example, the farm grows oil seed crops such as canola, sunflower and soybeans. By pressing that seed for bio-diesel, they have been able to self-sustain their diesel need every year by 50%.

The farm also grows its own cover crop seed in the form of winter wheat. That winter wheat, along with oilseed radish, annual ryegrass and crimson clover used as cover crops, provides a diverse mix of crops being cycled through the fields for the corn-hay rotation.

Depending upon field conditions, seed and chemical costs, Shannon uses both conventional and GMO seed on the farm. By considering all the elements of each field before making an economic decision, Shannon emphasizes that their farm it is not about convenience, it is about conservation and profitability.

Through work with NRCS and experimenting with cover crops, Shannon now knows which cover crops work best with each crop. For instance, he discovered that oilseed radish/clover combination works well after winter wheat in the wet soil. Because the radish leaves a large hole, water is able to infiltrate much deeper. He also found that annual ryegrass is the only thing that can out-compete the volunteer canola.

Through the EQIP program, this is the first year Shannon has tried a reduced tillage method on the cropland. Although they still have to incorporate liquid manure, the GPS system allows areas of the field to be left undisturbed.

NRCS will be continue supporting him for the next few years while he adjusts the strip-till system until it works for their farm and he perfects the farm's soil health system.



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