

Polk County Success from the Field

“Farming Ugly” on the Field Can Pay Off

Background

David Randall grows corn, soybeans and cover crops on over 1,000 acres near Balsam Lake, Wisconsin. An early adopter of no-till planting, cover cropping and split nutrient applications in his region, David has helped show how “farming ugly” on the field can pay off.

Program Successes

In 2009, through a friend's recommendation, David and his Dad, John, went to the local USDA-NRCS Service Center to inquire about the Conservation Stewardship Program. At that time, the Randalls grew green beans and corn using a combination of primary tillage methods. With the help of NRCS, they decided to plant cover crops after the green bean harvest as an enhancement to their operation. “In year one, the Randalls planted rye after they smoothed the field with a large disk,” recalls Keith Zygowicz, District Conservationist. “Sadly, it was really dry; the rye sprouted and then dried up. I thought they would never talk to me again, but the next spring that rye was green and growing; David has kept at it ever since,” added Zygowicz.

John was first to decide he wanted to go 100% no-till, helping to build his soil's health and also enabling him to spend more time doing things with the family once the crops were in the ground. David has done endless experimenting to implement conservation practices that help his soil and save him time and money. Some of the practices he has implemented include no-till, cereal rye cover cropping using a drill and aerial application, grid soil sampling, split nutrient applications and plant tissue nutrient testing to target when he should be applying his fertilizer. David figures these conservation practices save him about \$45 per acre and a whole lot of time. And the worms, “you've got to give credit to the worms—in hard times and tight budgets, they are the only employees I have, that I don't have to pay,” added Randall.

After John passed away in 2017, David decided to go 100% no-till on all the acres. Changing over to equipment for no-till can be expensive, but, as David says “You don't need all the technology, but you need to talk to someone who has used it, in order to find out what will work for your operation.” Sometimes modifying older planters is the way to go.



The typical look of David's fields early in the season, following cereal rye cover crop.

David is not afraid to “farm ugly” either. He is aware that sometimes what he is doing looks counterintuitive to neighbors and can even look like it's not working. For example, early in the season, his corn is smaller than some of the others and appears paler because it's not accented by black dirt. But, once July hits and the corn crop's canopy is filled in, the crop takes off and is as dark green as any other field.

Future Plans

In the future, David wants to try full season cover crops; trying a mixture of clovers, sunflowers, millet and small grains. David is looking forward to having more time for himself, to pursue leisure activities that he has missed over the years.

