

Brown County Success from the Field

Innovative Farmer Has Sights Set on Soil Health



Background

Pat Kane is a seventh generation dairy farmer at Kane Dairy LLC, in Denmark, Wisconsin. His family has been in the business of dairy farming since the early 1800s when the original farmstead was purchased just across the road from the present-day farm. Like many other dairy farms, they have seen substantial growth. In 1988 they milked 60 cows—today that number is 800. With a land base of about 2,800 acres, they can grow all of the forage for their animals, which also includes heifers raised on-site. Pat has slowly been taking over the farm from his father’s management and has progressively tried new field techniques with the goal of reducing labor, inputs and improving the soil.

Highlights

For Pat, the thought of building healthy soils began four years ago after talking with Brown County Land and Water Conservation and participating in field days. No-till and cover crops made economic sense to Pat, who stated that the practices “require less man power and save fuel.” Really the biggest hurdle was the uncertainty behind implementing new practices. Together with his dad and NRCS Soil Conservationist Julie Hager, Pat applied to implement a no-till and cover crop system through EQIP. His conservation plan was approved and with assistance from the NRCS Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, he implemented several hundred acres of cover crops and no-till.

So far, the benefits of no-till and cover crops have not gone unnoticed by Pat on the farm, or by members of the conservation community. In fact, Kane Dairy was one of the farms featured during the latest Save the Bay Farm Field Day. One of the greatest benefits Pat has observed is the ability to get manure out on the fields in summer. Not being limited to when manure can be applied has allowed their manure pit to sit below 40% capacity. In years before no-till and cover cropping, capacity this time of year was roughly 75%. This is a tremendous burden lifted off a busy dairy in the fall.

Generally, larger farms struggle to seed all of their cover crops in time given various limitations; however, Pat has solved this problem by being innovative with the equipment he uses, namely a vertical tillage unit (see picture). Pat expressed that



Pat Kane of Kane Dairy LLC, next to his vertical till cover crop seeder that allows for quick and efficient planting of cover crops on several hundred acres in variable conditions.

the vertical till has been great for wetter conditions and has nowhere near the soil compaction that a traditional horizontal tillage unit has. Only one tillage tool can be found on the farm with no field cultivator or chisel used for the last three years.

Future Plans

Looking ahead to the future of the dairy farm, Pat hopes to have all open acres covered and use less herbicide and fertilizer. He is encouraged by other farms in the country that have been able to reduce their fertilizer program by getting their soils built up through a regiment similar to his farm’s. He hopes, with the continuation of cocktail mix forages and in season application of manure, that this will be a real possibility in the years to come. He also plans to upgrade his cover crop seeder to allow for even more efficiency with an upgraded seed flow unit and toolbar. Next year he also plans to interseed more cover crops between corn silage. Each year continues to bring new lessons and new successes! NRCS looks forward to continuing to work with Pat to meet his conservation goals.

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