In the fight to keep their farms both sustainable and profitable, Virginia growers like Anthony Beery are taking a page from the sports playbook by going on the offensive with management systems that defend against opponents of soil health and productivity.

For the Shenandoah Valley grower, these opponents were compaction and erosion. Beery manages the cropping and poultry side of Beery Farms, Inc., with his father, Danny. For years, they had been putting manure from the dairy back in the fields and tilling to break up the soil.

“When I was a kid, I remember getting heavy thunderstorms in the summer and it would just wash the field,” explains Beery. “You’d end up with mud on the road that you’d have to scoop out of the way with a skid loader so the cars could go down the road.”

Writing New Plays

Though Beery knew the same old “plays” wouldn’t keep giving him the yields he wanted, he still took a leap of faith when he ditched the chisel plow and transitioned to no-till about 12 years ago.

NRCS Cropland Agronomist Chris Lawrence, who was the local extension agent at the time, was offering workshops on compaction that got Beery thinking and helped him start his own soil health playbook.

“It occurred to me that, if I tried to eliminate compaction before it happened, I wouldn’t need to fix it later,” says Beery.
Profiles in Soil Health

Anthony Beery

We went to zone tillage to break up the soil underneath but leave the top intact. We also bought a manure spreader and started doing our own spreading, which was a big step forward in addressing the issue and helping the no-till system work.

Like most farmers, Beery admits to being pretty independent. If he can do things his own way with acceptable costs, then that’s the way he’d prefer to operate.

He says his conservation activities have come together through an evolutionary process, trying new practices and approaches that benefitted the operation by reducing erosion and trips across the field.

“I don’t know that I went into it with an idea of using a system,” he explains. “Today, I see the value of a systemic approach and think it is important to see [soil health] that way.”

Adding Special Teams

Beery is also part of a group of Valley farmers participating in innovative demonstration projects like manure injection and cover crop mixes that allow him to think out of the box of conventional tillage options.

“We’ve been doing multiple species for six to eight years and I’m pretty excited about how that might improve soil health,” says Beery. “We worked with barley and vetch for years and saw some benefits in yield as well as quality. From there, I started putting in radishes.”

Beery knows that keeping living roots in the soil is a key strategy for improving organic matter and water holding capacity, but it took him about three years to be convinced that the radishes were doing the job.

"Big tubers are fun to look at, but it really made an impression when I planted corn and could see where the radishes had been planted year before. What’s going on on top of the ground is only part of the story."

“I’m up to three and four mixes and am still playing with combinations to find the one that works the best. There seems to be so much we don’t know, but there are enough proven benefits that it’s worth pushing ahead on it.”

Coaching for Success

Over the years, Beery has received NRCS technical assistance with his no-till and cover crop practices, manure injection, dairy loafing lot management systems, and nutrient management.

He is also completing a 10-year Conservation Security Program (CSP) contract to take his conservation practices to the next level.

“I liked the way the CSP was put together with various practices to choose from that fit your operation rather than a cut and dried approach with no flexibility,” he says.
Beery has been working to improve his land so that it will be healthy and productive for the next generation.

Beery is now paying it forward by sharing his knowledge with other farmers. He is a past president of the Virginia No-Till Alliance (VANTAGE) and active member of the organization. He says VANTAGE has an important role in educating farmers and allowing them to share their experiences.

“We try to focus our meetings around farmers talking with farmers,” he says. “There is so much we can learn from each other by sharing what we’re doing. Programs like these help farmers adopt no-till and continue to refine no-till practices.”

**Building a Legacy**

Though Beery can’t really pinpoint a particular turning point when he started being interested in soil health, he has no problem identifying the positive changes he has seen since he started heading down that road.

“In the spring, I don’t have to worry about plowing, discing it down, harrowing and all the things we need to do when we’re in a tillage system,” says Beery. “We’re growing organic matter in the soil and producing better crops because of it.”

“I’ve seen the soil become this sponge that actually takes in the water instead of dumping it off in the river, the creek or in the bottom of the field. Now, I’m barely seeing a trickle come out of the field during heavy rainfall.”

Anthony Beery is a featured no-tiller on Virginia’s *Gaining Ground* cropland video, which can be accessed online at [www.gaininggroundvirginia.org/](http://www.gaininggroundvirginia.org/).

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