On a crisp morning in late October, farmer Henry Roghair strides across the stubble on one of his fields near Okaton, SD, in south central South Dakota. Kneeling down, he pulls up a stalk of harvested milo and chuckles. There, hanging out of the root clump, is an earth worm. “Look at that,” Henry says with a smile. Whether you’re a backyard gardener or a big crop farmer, earthworms tend to mean one sure thing - healthy soil.

Roghair, a third generation South Dakota farmer, stands a striking 6-foot 8-inches tall. Wearing a red plaid cap and a chin strap beard, he reminds a person of Abraham Lincoln. But Roghair’s passion isn’t politics; it’s farming.

At 64, he has more than 40 years of farming experience under his belt, and since the mid-1990s, Roghair has used the conservation practices of a no-till farming system and crop rotations to great success.

“Since starting to no-till, all I’ve done is add granaries,” he says. “In this part of the world, as far as I’m concerned, there’s no other way to go than no-till. The soil is a lot easier to manage, and this is notoriously miserable soil.”

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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profiles in soil health

While Henry says he dabbled in conservation practices in high school, it wasn’t until the mid-90s that he gave it a full-fledged try. That was when, “Beck showed up. John Deere made a no-till drill and Roundup showed up on the scene,” he says.

“Beck” is Dwayne Beck, director of the Dakota Lakes Research Farm in Pierre and a strong proponent of no-till, cover crops and other conservation practices.

At that time, like most farmers, Roghair was into the “wheat/summer fallow routine.” He began drawing on the expertise of the technical staff of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and borrowed a no-till drill from a neighbor, planting 20 acres of milo.

He saw a yield increase immediately due to the continuous crop schedule allowed in no-till, but Roghair says he also noticed improved yields from better soil health very quickly. Today, it’s obvious what no-till is doing for his farm’s soil, he says. When a prairie fire threatened one of his fields in September 2012, Henry disked two strips between the fire and the majority of the no-till field. The fire was eventually stopped before it got to his land, but the fire prevention move demonstrated the striking benefits of no-till, he says.

When it came time for harvest, the yield from the fire strip area was one-third less than that of the acres in the no-till portion of the field. That’s after 15 years of no-till used on the recently disked portion. “That’s pretty dramatic,” Henry says.

Roghair said that while most farmers in the Okaton area use at least some no-till, not everyone is convinced. He understands their initial hesitation. “It takes more management than the tillage system,” he says. “A big disk will cover up a lot of mistakes.”

But the proof is in the yields, something Roghair says he and other farmers see firsthand. “It’s about the conservation but the economics work,” he says. “The economics work.”

Background

Third generation South Dakota farmer Henry Roghair and his wife Elaine own 3,500 acres in the Okaton area. They farm 2,000 of those acres and practice no-till and crop rotation techniques.

Henry Roghair, South Dakota

Henry pulls up a milo stalk from one of his fields and finds an earthworm hanging from the roots.

The Roghair family first came to Okaton, SD, in the mid-1920s when Henry’s grandparents, Henry and Cornelia Roghair, moved their family from Northwest Iowa. “They came out to the new Cornbelt,” Henry says with a smile, “but, by 1930, they figured out it wasn’t the new Cornbelt.” The family stayed anyway.

Over the years, his grandfather bought up surrounding farms, eventually selling them to five of his 13 children. One of those children was Henry’s father, Nicholas Albert Roghair. He instilled in Henry a love of farming. Henry rented and planted his first field while still in high school.

Roghair’s degree from South Dakota State University in wildlife and fisheries science was his “insurance policy,” but he always knew he wanted to farm.

“I love to farm,” he says. “I don’t always love the other things that come with it, but I love to farm.”

Henry has been involved in crop management at various levels, including serving as a state director of the South Dakota Crop Improvement Association, a member of the South Dakota Pulse Council, the Jones County Crop Improvement Association and South Dakota Wheat, Inc. In 2007, he was named Premier Seed Grower by the South Dakota Crop Improvement Association.

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