Steve Reimer
Chamberlain, SD
Crops: corn, soybeans, wheat and forage oats in their cash crop rotation with turnips, radishes and lentils
Planting: no-till and adding cover crop mix

When Reimer started focusing on the maximizing soil biological activity, one of his management techniques has been keeping the soil covered throughout the season and with each crop rotation.

Reimer soon saw major differences by eliminating tillage. The moisture infiltration in his fields changed dramatically over the years. In fact, now even after the substantial rainfalls in 2013, a trip around the ranch reveals empty dug-outs.

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profiles in soil health

“To me, those dry dug-outs are the biggest indicators of improvement around here,” Reimer said. That is a direct reflection of the soil’s capabilities to capture moisture and eliminate run-off. “It’s a visual confirmation.”

However large or small they might be, validating improvements is important. Especially since the first year of no-tilling appeared to start out shaky comments Reimer. “When our first field of no-till corn started coming up, I’m sure people wondered what we’d done wrong,” Reimer recalled. “The black dirt (in conventional tilled fields) had a higher soil temp, so the corn popped up early and green. Our no-till corn was coming out of the ground yellow, slow and weak. Then, that year it didn’t rain but the no-till corn kept growing. At harvest time, we chopped corn in the conventional-tilled fields for silage and harvested the no-till fields.”

With no further convincing necessary, Reimer made a concerted effort to be knowledgeable about farming technology. Today, a trip to the ranch reveals the focus Steve and his wife, Elaine, have on ensuring their operation’s long-term viability and health.

In addition to corn, soybeans, wheat and forage oats, Reimer utilizes turnips, radishes and lentils in his crop rotations. The crop aftermath and cover crops are great for late season grazing which Reimer says gets the manure back out on the fields where it belongs.

“About five years ago, we decided to invest in cover crops,” Reimer said. “The cover crops were strictly intended for soil health. So, at first, we wondered what we were getting out of it. It’s not like you can harvest it or cut hay. The only way for us was to pasture it and we could get about half the value of planting back in grazing.”

Reimer continued, “The real long-term value, though, is in what cover crops actually do for the soil fertility in regard to micro-organisms, replenishing nitrogen and moisture utilization.”

Soil tests conducted on each field every three years confirm increased organic matter and nitrogen levels. With the volatility of uncontrollable factors, like rain and temperature, attributing hard numbers directly to no-till and cover crops is a challenge. Experience, however, proves to the Chamberlain-native the value of his investments in soil health.

Reimer says it’s been a learning journey. “Stacy Turgeon, our local District Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service has been a positive partner,” Reimer said. “She’s provided valuable help with conservation technical assistance and through programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).” The couple has three children and four grandchildren. “We want to make sure our family’s land stays healthy to produce quality crops and grasses for generations to come. I think we’re on the right path,” says Reimer.

“I have a long-term focus on agriculture and believe taking care of the land is important. I know the things we’re doing to take care of the soil will pay dividends over time, and I’ve seen a difference the practices like no-till, cover crops and rotational grazing have made for me,” Reimer said.

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