

Tough no-till questions and answers

By MEECEE BAKER

NO-TILL has been gaining momentum nationwide as producers seek out ways to reduce fuel and labor costs. To foster its use, leaders of the Pennsylvania No-Till Alliance will be addressing key common concerns in a special series of *American Agriculturist* articles, beginning with this one.

Key Points

- Continuous no-till, crop rotation and cover crops are essential.
- A can-do attitude is the most critical no-till element.
- Start the transition one to two years ahead with careful crop planning.

Answering the questions will be Jim Hershey, a Master Farmer and No-Till Alliance vice president from Elizabethtown, Pa., and Sjoerd Duiker, Penn State Extension soils management specialist and Alliance adviser.

Q: I hear it's difficult to transition to no-till. Is it a real or perceived issue? With my approach, how do I deal with

it in my corn silage, corn grain, soybeans and grass hay rotation?

Hershey: Rotating crops is the best way to control weed pressure and disease issues. If you rotate crops in the same sequence you listed, I'd suggest a slight change.

No-till the grass hay into the corn stubble in early September. Then follow hay with corn for grain. Next, no-till soybeans in those stalks, then follow with corn for silage. And, plant some sort of cover in the soybean stubble to protect the soil over winter.

All this can be accomplished without a chisel plow or a disk. It's very important to have a well-maintained no-till drill and no-till corn planter properly set and adjusted.

Duiker: The main difficulty during the transition is attitude. A farmer with a can-do attitude will succeed.

Planting problems are the most common challenges. The planter must be able to plant at the proper depth and spacing. That means crop residue needs to be properly distributed during the previous harvest.

Your planter needs to slice through those residues, not hair-pin seed into the seed slot.

After a couple of years of hay, soil quality is usually good. The hay needs to be fall-killed so the beginning no-tiller doesn't struggle with terminating it during spring.

Another good place to start is after soybeans. That way you don't have too much residue to plant through.

Lack of residue after corn silage means moisture conservation, biological activity and erosion control are at their lowest. That's not a great place to start no-tilling. Starting after a bumper corn grain harvest also may not be the best. You'll have large amounts of residue to plant through. You'll need to set the planter up just right to be successful.

Be willing to accept some stumbling at first if things don't look perfect that first year. Interact with experienced no-tillers, and make adjustments based on their advice.

Baker is a consultant for Pennsylvania No-Till Alliance.

Hershey and Duiker will be available for questions during the Professional Crop Producers Conference, Feb. 17 and 18, at the PennState Conference Center, State College. For more details visit www.panotill.com or call 717-635-2320.



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"If you use rotational tillage [occasionally use no-till], you'll never reap the benefits."



JIM HERSHEY

"Plan a year or two in advance so you can plan your crop rotation leading up to that planting season."