

Make water work

By ANN TONER

TRYING to work with the Nebraska Panhandle climate and make a living on the land invites innovation. Kirk Laux and his family of Bridgeport are constantly trying new ways to get better yields with fewer, or more judicious, applications of water.

William and Jacquelyn Laux and their grown children, Kirk, Kent and Timothy, along with their families, operate a feedlot and cow-calf operation, and tend crop and hay land. Kirk Laux and his wife, Cheryl, have four children: Hayley Noonan (husband Brad), Jordan, Shane and Courtney.

At a glance

- The Lauxes raise crops and cattle in the Pumpkin Creek watershed.
- They are trying new measures to farm with less irrigation water.
- They realize someday they may face an even lower water allocation.

Their water-saving efforts and experiments are made all the more urgent because their farming operation and feedlot is located within the Pumpkin Creek watershed. The embattled creek, largely waterless and narrow enough to step across as it meanders through their property, has been a subject of acrimony, past and pending court cases, and groundwater allocation for the past few years.

The Lauxes and other irrigators along Pumpkin Creek have had a 14-inch water allocation in recent years from the North Platte Natural Resources District. At press time, that NRD was considering reducing the allocation to 12 inches. But the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District is pushing for a much lower allocation to get water flowing in the creek again, and into shrunken Lake McConaughy.

Tim Anderson, Central spokesman, says a consultant the district hired contends that in order to get Pumpkin Creek to 65% of its capacity, watershed irrigators would have to use no more than 3 to 4 inches of water annually.

More with less

The Lauxes have retired some irrigated acreage to conserve water in the basin. On center pivots, they've turned off end guns and planted the acres previously watered that way to permanent native grass under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The grass is hayed or grazed during the winter months.

By irrigating fewer acres under the allocation system, Kirk can make more water available to his remaining irrigated acres. In this way, he applies 16 to 17 inches of water to grow crops on the remaining irrigated acres, staying within the NRD limits, and still using less water than he did with more acres. The Lauxes continue to experiment with how to do more with less.

Dry bean irrigation

One of the family cash crops is dry edible beans. Kirk has been experimenting with better ways for his family to grow beans for several years, particularly with little or no tillage.

The Lauxes have tried beans in 30-inch rows and 15-inch rows, and in 7½-inch drilled beans. Kirk says he likes the drilled beans and the 15-inch rows the best, "but those narrower row widths are not enough to justify the luxury of a second planter to get them in."

Instead, he plants them in 20-inch rows using his existing Kinze Twin Line planter, which has GPS, air clutches on the row units and swath control, so it doesn't double-plant when it crosses a row.

Kirk has been experimenting with direct harvest of dry edible beans because swathing leaves the crop at the mercy of wind and rain. Last year, he used a Shelbourne stripper head on the combine, but suffered quite a few split beans. This year, he hopes to harvest them a little wetter.

"Better to take a moisture dock than the field loss," he says.

Working with company chemical representatives, he tried a new herbicide combination last spring: Valor, a soybean herbicide, with Dual and Roundup, to give him both burndown and residual weed control.

Kirk says two fields of beans had excellent yields, one was medium and one was a disappointment, due to poor early-season weed control.



STRAIGHT AND NARROW: Kirk Laux of Bridgeport plants no-till dry edible beans in 20-inch rows to preserve soil moisture and use less water for irrigation.

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POSTMASTER: Please send address corrections to *Nebraska Farmer*, 255 38th Ave., Suite P, St. Charles, IL 60174.



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In 2007, Kirk tried planting in a circle on both corn and dry edible beans, because he doesn't like bouncing over sprinkler tracks.

In 2008, he went back to straight rows on beans, but he kept the circular pattern on his corn rows.

Cover crops

Kirk also plants a cover crop on fallow winter wheat acres. He's planted turnips and grazed them in the past. He likes to put pairs from the fall-calving cow herd on the grazing mix because it's a good way to flush them for the breeding season.

This year, the fallow acres were planted to a hybrid turnip-brassica mix combined with peas, lentils, oats, and any half bags of corn and sunflowers left over from spring planting.

"I'm copying some of the other no-till guys," Kirk says. "I'm hoping for more production and more diversity in grazing. I'm hoping the sunflowers will mine any leftover nutrients."