



**SOAKING IT UP:** Jason Lay (left) is eager to put into practice everything he's learned from successful strip-till farmers and educators like U of I's Bob Fraze.

# How one farmer remains on track with strip tillage

By DOUG PETERSON

**S**TRIP till means fewer trips across the field than conventional tillage. However, it also means more intense trips, and that took some getting used to, according to Steve Hawthorne, a Ford County strip-till veteran.

"It's a busy, high-skilled operation. The strip-till rig will certainly keep you awake," Hawthorne says. "It's not like just getting into the tractor with a chisel plow behind you. You've got markers to deal with, you've got ammonia to deal with, and I had liquid fertilizer to deal with."

After creating the strips in the fall, he says another challenge has been following those strips with the planter in the spring.

"The lighter-colored soils in particular will be nearly the same color as the bean trash," explains Hawthorne. "The one thing you've got to see is where there's a little more dirt piled up. I've gotten much better at seeing this."

## RTK guides new way

To stay on track this year, Hawthorne recently invested in a real-time kinematic, or RTK, guidance system. Without a guidance system, he says the answer to "seeing the strips" is to "just stop the

## Key Points

- Strip-till means fewer, but more intense trips across the field.
- You need to change the way you think and see for strip till.
- Many strip-till farmers are using RTK and autosteering.

tractor, get out, and get a little closer and see what's there. While the tractor is stopped, focus your eyes on what you see and say, 'Okay, here is what I need to look for.'"

Hawthorne is just one of many strip-till farmers using the latest technology, such as RTK, autosteering and "the whole nine yards," says Bob Fraze, University of Illinois Extension natural resources educator. "More and more farmers are going with strip-till farming and/or controlled traffic patterns because they're getting greater accuracy and greater efficiency with both planting and the application of pesticides."

Some people may be put off by the adjustments required with strip till, Hawthorne says, "but strip till is one of those things you've got to get in your mind that you want to make it work."

*Peterson writes for University of Illinois Extension.*

## Get better equipped to strip

**W**HEN Steve Hawthorne began strip tilling seven years ago, he ran up against a glaring lack of available equipment. He says that anhydrous ammonia applicators, adapted for strip till, were not available for leasing near his Ford County farm.

That's changing throughout Illinois, according to Eli Meister, the manager of Crop Production Services in Fairbury.

Crop Production Services began leasing strip-till equipment six years ago, beginning with about eight farmers the first year. Today, roughly two dozen producers lease their anhydrous ammonia applicators, which have been adapted for strip-tillage systems.

What's more, Meister has seen strip till pay big dividends for these producers, especially those who had switched from no-till corn.

"When these farmers no-tilled corn, their yield was reduced by about 25 bushels per acre," Meister says. "But when they put the strips in, they got that 25 bushels back, plus they gained a little bit."

Meister has done some direct comparisons and has found that strip-till corn has been about 10 bushels per acre better than conventional tillage. He attributes the boost to planting right

on top of the fertilizer.

On certain land, the difference has been even more dramatic. According to Meister, one farmer in their area has heavy clay soil and never got a good stand because the tractor packed the soil down.

"But when he did strip-till, in which he didn't drive on the strips, he got a perfect stand," Meister noted. "Overall, it probably increased his yields by 20% or 30%."

## Applicator choices

Crop Production Services offers two types of anhydrous applicators for strip till. They have six regular anhydrous applicators, which have been modified to create the mounds in the fall. They also have a couple of machines that do root-zone banding, applying dry fertilizer at the same time as the anhydrous ammonia.

Meister says they were one of the few places to lease strip-till equipment when they began their program six years ago. Today, other companies have jumped on the bandwagon. At the same time, more and more producers are jumping on the strip-till bandwagon — and staying there.

Says Meister: "I'd say that about 95% of the producers we work with stay with strip till."

## Inside Illinois Ag Briefs

### Equine vet dies

Dean Scoggins, 71, an equine Extension veterinarian at the University of Illinois until his retirement in 2004, died in December. Scoggins suffered a stroke, following a lengthy battle with cancer. His death came three weeks to the day after his induction into the Land of Lincoln Purebred Livestock Breeders Association's Hall of Fame. He was involved with his own horses for more than 50 years.

### Sheep day is March 3

Sheep producers, 4-H'ers and FFA members can pick up some timely tips at the Illinois Valley Lamb and Wool Growers Sheep Barn Tour and Educational Program on March 3. Farm tour starts at 9 a.m. at the Steve Ulrich Farm, Eureka. The program runs until 1 p.m. Joining with the Sheep Barn Tour will be the Illinois Sheep Industry Day and Illinois Lamb & Wool Producers Annual Meeting. Make reservations by calling (309) 467-3809 or e-mailing [petehelen@dtmspeed.net](mailto:petehelen@dtmspeed.net) by Feb. 26. For more information, go to [www.livestocktrail.uiuc.edu/sheepnet](http://www.livestocktrail.uiuc.edu/sheepnet).

### Ethanol at a glance

- One bushel of corn yields 2.5 to 2.7 gallons of ethanol from the starch component of corn.
- Ethanol production adds 20 to 40 cents to the value of a bushel of corn, according to USDA.
- Ethanol production adds \$4.5 billion to U.S. farm income annually.
- Ethanol production increased 20% in 2006.

### Dogs rule the roost

Which animal is the brightest in the barnyard? Here's a ranking of relative animal intelligence by two different groups — zoologists and animal scientists — that appeared in the Bottom Line column written by *Feedstuffs* magazine columnist Kenneth Eng.

Species	Species ranking*	
	By animal scientists	By zoologists
Dogs	2.25	1.53
Pigs	2.50	1.67
Horses	2.80	2.00
Cats	2.81	2.40
Cattle	3.40	2.83
Sheep	3.42	3.00
Chickens	3.67	4.50
Turkeys	4.00	4.83

\*Ranking of intelligence (1=Highest; 5=Lowest). SOURCE: FEEDSTUFFS MAGAZINE

### Angus farm honored

McLaughlin's Angus Farm, Mason City, recently received the Historic Herd Award by the American Angus Association. The award is given to a family that's been in the continuous production of registered Angus cattle for 50 years or more. A registered Angus herd was established by Howard and Dorothy McLaughlin in 1956, when their oldest son, Edwin, purchased a heifer, which he exhibited in 4-H and FFA. Today, their son Jim and his wife, Emily, still maintain a herd of about 20 registered Angus cows on the original place, and Dorothy, 88, still enjoys going through the cattle. At its height, McLaughlin's Angus Farm ran 70 cow-calf pairs.

## Residue challenge

Lay says the biggest challenge so far has been dealing with heavy residue when using his anhydrous applicator. "We're dealing with residue in corn on corn, so it's more challenging than running an anhydrous toolbar through chiseled stalks," he notes. "But we knew that going into it."

For those considering strip till, Lay suggests you set out a vision — a long-term plan for where you want to be. "Do you want to try to do more with less?" he asks. "Do you want to control the same amount of acres five years from now and still do it yourself?"

"It's not an easy decision," he adds. "It's not for everybody. But I'm only 33 years old and plan on making a career of it."

Lay compares the commitment to that of a marriage. "Once you're committed, you've got to put in the effort and the patience."

*Peterson writes for University of Illinois Extension.*