Zone tillage works in CSP

By JASON JOHNSON

THE Flynn brothers from Story County saw too much of their soil blowing in the breeze. That, and problems with corn falling over due to soil compaction from years of conventional tillage was enough to convince them to try a different practice called zone till, or strip tillage.

Zone till is a simultaneous tillage/planting operation that removes crop residues from a 10-inch area over the row and minimally tills this area while leaving the inter-row region undisturbed.

Zone till is strip till practiced in the spring. It is an alternative to no-till in regions that have cool spring soil temperatures.

"We were tired of our soil blowing and washing away," says Gene Flynn. "The most prominent soils in Story County are Clarion, Nicollet and Webster. Our soils are heavy and don't drain very well, but when it gets dry the soil can blow."

Gene is the oldest of three brothers. He has farmed with his younger brother, Todd, since 1979 and with his youngest brother, Shawn, since 1981. Together they farm 4,500 acres of corn and soybeans, along with some feed corn. They also run a small cow-calf operation on 65 acres of pasture. "It's not enough for the cows, but we feed them and dry-lot them, feeding them supplement," says Gene.

Improved yields, too

Besides reducing soil erosion, zone till helps improve yields. "We were getting 200-bushel corn, and we couldn't get above that before. We knew we needed to make a change," Gene adds.

Switching from conventional tillage to zone till in 2002, along with hundreds of acres of conservation tillage practices that save soil, improve water quality and attract wildlife, helped the three brothers qualify for a contract in the 2006 Conservation Security Program sign-up. "If you're conventionally tilling, you're not going to get in CSP," says Gene. "We get calls all of the time from farmers interested in zone till or strip till."

FARMING BROTHERS: (From left) Brothers Todd, Shawn and Gene Flynn have farmed together in Story County since 1981. They've made several changes in their practices to qualify for the CSP program.

Security Program sign-up.

"The good news continues down about 0.4% from a year earlier," calculates Ron Plain, University of Missouri economist. "Beef was down 0.8%, broilers were down 8.3% and turkey was down 13.4%."

"The production cost hike, the production cut and the drop in demand were the three things that made it tough," said Gene. "Continuing expansion, albeit slow expansion, suggests hog producers may not yet realize the changed message about ethanol-influenced corn prices," cautions Hurt. "Maybe it's because they have yet to witness impacts of a local ethanol plant confiscating much of the corn available locally."

Hogs beat chickens on demand

DECEMBER through February demand for pork was down about 2.9% from a year earlier," calculates Ron Plain, University of Missouri economist. "Beef was down 0.8%, broilers were down 8.3% and turkey was down 13.4%.

"The good news continues to be live hog demand, which for December 2006 through February 2007 was up 1.2%," he adds.

Live fed-cattle demand for those three months was down about 0.4% from a year earlier.

Chickens lost momentum, too.

"For all of 2006, broiler demand was down more than 7% from 12 months earlier," notes Plain.

Suppose broiler demand at the consumer level continues down through 2007, near the 2006 level. That drop would be the first major decline in consumer broiler demand since the early 1980s.

"Have we finally come to that time where broiler demand does not grow practically every year?" pondered Plain.