

# Crop residue matters

By CAROL BROWN

**I**N September a new campaign was launched in Iowa promoting the benefits of leaving crop residue on the field. The Residue Matters campaign's main message is that farmers and landowners can save money, soil and nutrients when residue is left on the field.

Many of our Iowa Learning Farm cooperators have been saying and living this idea for some time. They have reduced their tillage and are seeing the outcome of what residue management can do for their soils, nutrients and operating expenses.

**Saving soil.** "I get good yield results



from no-till," says Muscatine County farmer Doug Nolte.

"I see neighbors who still chisel cornstalks, and I have seen a lot of soil move from the land. If we could show them the cost of losing the topsoil, you might be able to convince more people to move to no-till."

## Learn more

**F**OR more information about Residue Matters, visit [www.residuematters.org](http://www.residuematters.org). For information about the Iowa Learning Farm, go to [www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf).

The Residue Matters campaign was introduced this fall to encourage farmers to value the crop residue on their fields. Iowa Learning Farm cooperators are helping to teach others the benefits of reduced tillage. Through various messages, the goals of Residue Matters and ILF are to increase Iowa soil and water quality.

Recent research and economic studies are putting a price tag on the cost of eroded soil. Based on USDA estimates, the total cost of eroded soil is between \$6.10 and \$6.40 per ton, using 2009 values. No-till retains more of that value in the field where it belongs.

Paul Hunter knows the value of his soil. "I have always hated going through fields and seeing erosion channels," he says. "Maybe because I know how long it will take to get it back. Maybe because I'm young and I worry what the land will be like when I'm older. Once it is gone, it's gone." Hunter farms with his father, Gordon, in Winneshiek County.

**Saving nutrients.** Palo Alto farmer Joel Zwiefel knows his soil quality has improved since he began a no-till corn-following-corn rotation. "We are building more residue, yields have risen and organic matter has increased," says Zwiefel. "The earthworm population has increased over time as well. They help to break down the residue."

Fort Dodge farmer Dave Nelson works with ILF at the Smeltzer Trust Demonstration Farm near Otho. He considers soil quality an important factor when switching to no-till.

"It was an easy step once we evaluated what we were doing with the soil," says Nelson. "We are in prime time right now with corn costs, fertilizer costs and the supply demands that we are faced with today. There is a lot of consideration that goes into how you conserve the nutrients in the soil and consider better fertilizer placement."

**Saving money.** Most farmers will tell you that economics is the main factor they considered when switching to a reduced-tillage system. Jerry Crew says if he didn't make money, he wouldn't be no-tilling. "Conservation doesn't cost; it pays," he says. "I believe no-tillage is giving me better yields and reducing my costs." Crew farms in Clay County. He's practiced no-till for more than 25 years.

Shelby County farmer Bill Buman knows soil quality and economics are integral to one another. "My thing has always been soil quality," he says. "I've lowered my costs, and my yields keep going up through no-till. There's an economic benefit to no-tilling. A lot of farmers look at the immediate impact to their pocketbook. They don't worry about the future of the land and what the impacts are off site."

The Iowa Learning Farm is one of many partners in the campaign. The goals for the campaign and ILF are the same: to value and preserve the land we have in Iowa and increase the quality of the waters that run through the state.

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