

Beech River Watershed of Tennessee

FARM #10

Alex Johnson has been farming in Scotts Hill, Tennessee, for about 17 years. On his primarily soybean operation, he has been 100 percent no-till for 12 years and has been planting cover crops for seven years.

He became interested in these practices after reading about them and talking them with his fellow farmers. “You’re always looking for a better way,” he said. “Whether it’s caring for humans or caring for the soil that’s on the farm for sustainability, the goals don’t change. It’s the same either way - looking for the better way to do it.”

Normally, Alex plants a cover crop mix of seven or eight species, because he recognizes the benefit of having species that might survive when others do not. In 2019, he planted a mix of crimson clover, Austrian winter peas, cereal rye, triticale, wheat, winter oats and tillage radish.

Alex has seen his soil and seed bed continuously improve throughout his years of cover crops. “The cover crops make a big difference,” he said. “The seed bed improves in terms of what you’re planting into. That becomes incredible after a few years of doing it.” His soils have become granular, with a strong, sweet, earthy smell. He has also seen an improvement in his carbon buildup, organic matter and water holding capacity.

Erosion has significantly decreased on his operation due to his practices. Alex recalls an ‘aha! moment’ a few years ago, when runoff from his field during intense rain was clear instead of muddy. “You can see clean water draining off from the standpoint where we know you’re not losing the soil, topsoil especially,” he said.

Another big benefit that Alex sees is weed control. “If you have a uniform stand, a very good cover crop, and you give it the potential to reach where it needs to be before you plant and terminate, you’ll see the benefits on weed control.” This benefit has allowed him to eliminate one post-emergent herbicide application, which he amounts to be a savings of \$20-\$25 per acre.



Alex admits that there was a big learning curve for him when starting these practices, but he learned quickly and thinks it is well worth it. To individuals interested in trying these practices, he says, “start with a few acres and learn how to manage that before you progress. But, I’ll also say that you can progress faster than you think.”

View Alex’s interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRmOETIhe1E>

“You’re always looking for a better way. Whether it’s caring for humans or caring for the soil that’s on the farm for sustainability, the goals don’t change. It’s the same either way - looking for the better way to do it.”

Beech River Watershed of Tennessee

