

Lower Big Sioux River Watershed of Minnesota

FARM #12

Ian Cunningham (middle) and his son, Richard (left), produce corn, soybeans, alfalfa and beef cattle on their farm, established in 1885 in southwest Minnesota.

Ian has farmed in Pipestone since the late '70s, and Richard has been farming in the partnership for three years, but the farm has been in continuous operation for more than 134 years.

The Cunninghams manage an intensive grazing system, growing some annual forages for the cow herd, and feed out all of the calves.

Ian's predecessors recognized a need for less tillage back in the 1940s. "In 1967, my dad bought one of the first no-till planters in southwest Minnesota," Ian said. They employed ridge-till in the '90s and began strip-till corn and no-till soybeans in the early 2000s. "We've been no-till ever since," Ian said. "We try to incorporate cover crops on our land, at least once a year on every acre. And we also try to get the cows on every acre at some point throughout the year."

Ian says they always try to do the practices that technology and available equipment allowed. "It's been a natural progression, to have less disturbance, to keep the soil armored, to have more diversity than just a two-crop rotation, to keep living roots in the ground as much as possible."

The Cunninghams are in frequent cooperation with the Pipestone Soil and Water Conservation District and received assistance from their local NRCS office with procuring an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract for interior fencing and water systems when they wanted to convert crop land into perennial forages as they expanded their cowherd. The district also helps with soil health assessments, and the Cunninghams utilize learning opportunities sponsored jointly by local conservation districts and NRCS.



They visually inspect the field and examine soil aggregation and soil structure regularly, conducting soil tests every four years when possible. Ian says he doesn't view soil health systems as a cost. "I look at it more as an investment that we expect to get a return on the investment. The money we spend on cover crop seed wouldn't begin to make the payment or put the fuel in a piece of equipment to do intensive tillage. It's always a benefit."

View Ian and Richard's interview:

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

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