

Yellow River and Upper Iowa River Watersheds of Iowa

FARM #20

Don Elsbernd (far right) has been farming with his wife, Trish, in northeast Iowa for over 38 years. Their operation began as a crop and dairy farm, but eventually transitioned into a crop-only operation.

“I have always considered myself a conservationist, and we are always looking for ways to improve on what we are doing,” Don said.

Don and Trish have been practicing no-till and utilizing cover crops for many years. They have used many other conservation practices as well, including conservation buffers, contour farming, grassed waterways and variable rate technology.

“We use an integrated approach to conservation, but our most recent focus has been on soil health,” Don said. “We’re getting a better understanding of what healthy soil can do, and does do, for us. Its been an ongoing learning process for us.”

Throughout the years of utilizing cover crops and no-till, Don has seen many benefits. One of the first things he noticed with no-till was how his soil became more firm. Compaction has become less of an issue for him, and he’s almost stopped using that completely. Don has also seen an improvement in water holding capacity and weed control. While he has only seen a slight boost in organic matter, he expects to see bigger gains as time goes on.

“The benefits of these practices are absolutely worth what we are putting into them,” said Don. “If you’re increasing yields because of soil health, then there’s clearly an advantage to that. If you’re saving on nutrients, there’s an economic benefit there. If you start putting all of those things together, it doesn’t take long to get a return on investment.”

Implementing these practices has not come without challenges for Don. “In our region of the country, we have a relatively short growing season, and trying to establish cover crops after harvest creates some challenges,” he said. However, through experimentation, Don has found good success in seeding prior to Oct. 20.



To individuals interested in trying these practices, Don says, “gather a lot of information, talk to a lot of people, start small, and focus on an integrated system that works for your operation.”

View Don’s interview:

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

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