

Big Sioux River Watershed of South Dakota

FARM #6

Aaron Johnson farms in Orland Township, south of Madison, South Dakota, two miles away from his uncle, Charlie. Aaron has been farming full-time since 2011, and Charlie has been farming with his brother Alan since 1981.

Aaron took over his parents' operation from Charlie and relies on his partnership for use of heavy machinery and for flexibility when it comes to scheduling as he raises his young family. "I think it's been pretty successful," Charlie said. "We still plant and harvest together and help each other out as much as possible. It allows him to step out of the mentee role and become his own boss." Aaron's grateful for the mentorship. "Equipment aside, the thing I lean on the most is their advice," he said. "I call them and from time to time they call me, and we call them the 'guardian angel phone calls.'"

Aaron's organic farming operation consists of 560 acres, 400 of which are tillable. He runs a six-year rotation with corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa, with a cover crop of winter rye and some stock cattle. He employs minimal tillage, with a cover crop for three seasons to help build organic matter.

"In that six-year rotation, we're able to maintain very healthy soils, high water infiltration rates - our organic matter is four percent plus in a lot of areas throughout the entire farm. It has a lot of consistency in dealing with Mother Nature as far as droughts and water - helps us buffer those ups and downs." Aaron and Charlie have noticed better water retention, tolerance for wind and water erosion, increased micro-nutrients, and improved yield on their land.

Aaron has divided his operation into smaller-sized, 20- to 50-acre parcels, which he finds beneficial when trying to plant following bad weather, along with his rotation schedule. "It just reduces your risk dramatically," he said. "You can pick and choose the fields you wanna go to. We can work with the land and put our fields where fields are fit to be put." Lake County Conservation District has helped to keep Mother Nature at bay, installing terraces, assisting with tree plantings, and putting up retention dams. "You got land that can be good in one year and bad the next year, just depending on what nature brings your way," he said.



Aaron's advice for other organic farmers looking to boost their soil health is to "Gather other advice and seek out other organic farmers. The practices vary greatly. There is no set protocol - what happens in our area is different for other farmers 30 to 40 miles away. Climate and soil textures change, soil structures change as well, so seek those individuals out that have done some in their area - or have done a lot in their area."

View Aaron and Charlie's interview:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa72pj63ogc>

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