

Leading Edge

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No·till
On The Plains

One Step Ahead

by Keith Thompson



Stepping into one of Craig Stehly's long-term no-till corn fields near Mitchell, South Dakota, what quickly strikes you is how weed-free his fields are, and how little herbicide he used. No, things don't always work out this perfectly for him (especially with this year's drought), but by keeping



Photo by Matt Hagry.

During a summer bus tour, Craig Stehly discusses the value of keeping wheat in his rotation (his area is predominantly in a corn >>>soybean rotation) as well as his methods of managing wheat stubble for corn planting.

a wary eye out for vulnerabilities in his farming system, Stehly always seems to stay a little ahead of the pack.

Although Stehly got started no-tilling back in 1986, he has changed his thoughts on the best way to no-till many times, and has altered his practices almost as much. Why, you ask, does he change things all the time? Simply because the perfect system doesn't exist, and never will; we will always be tweaking it. We will learn more, and technology and markets will rearrange things even further, making yesterday's 'perfect' system obsolete (kinda like that manual typewriter you have lying around somewhere, or that old IBM 286 or Apple II computer collecting dust). Stehly certainly doesn't drift aimlessly in his practices—he always takes a good look around before making a move.

One of Stehly's biggest changes was that early switch to no-till, which began with Craig's first encounter with "ecofallow" in 1984 during a farm tour in Nebraska. While the fallow portion of the system didn't fit his area at all, the concept that intrigued him in ecofallow was the

preservation of the small grain stubble to be no-till planted to corn the following year. If done correctly, it was economical and the extra water stored by the small grain stubble really paid off in corn yield. Plus, wind & water erosion were reduced. Enthused, Craig went home and tried keeping some barley stubble and no-till planted his corn into it—this worked out very well for him.

Then, in 1988, "the light came on" for Craig. It was a severe drought year, and he was headed up to the SDSU Experiment Farm at Redfield. Along the way, all the conventional-till crops were brown

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