

by Matt Hagny

Les Sims certainly defies tradition in his farming operation just south of Wichita, KS, and that discerning management style is exactly what has kept him profitable and expanding over the years. In an area typified by burning, plowing, and continuous wheat, Sims' no-till techniques and high percentage of summer crops stand in stark contrast.

The history of Sims Farms isn't what you'd expect either. Les grew up on a successful livestock and grain farm in northwest Missouri, but chose an engineering & management career instead (Les has an electrical engineering degree from Univ. Missouri and an MBA from Wichita State), including 30 years in the aerospace industry, mostly with Boeing. Les eventually returned to farming, albeit in an entirely new location. Since then, Les has been joined by his son, Fred, who studied computer science at K-State and did stints in the Army and in hotel management in California. They both work full-time on the farm these days.

At first, Les approached farming using the standard practices for the area: lots of plowing and continuous wheat. Always looking for a better way, he initially considered going 'organic' over a wide acreage, prompted by his son Eric's interest in 'organic' gardening



(Eric & wife Shelly had 20 acres of Certified Organic—some of the first in the area at the time), although the lack of a market caused Les to rethink that plan. Still, Les knew there had to be a way to meet his profitability goals, and that traditional farming wasn't it. A self-described "avid environmentalist," Les also questioned whether traditional farming was anything close to

sustainable—in his own words, he has a strong desire to pass the land on to future generations in better condition than when he received it. While confessing to be a "numbers freak,"

Les also notes that "most of our agricultural research is focused on maximizing crop yield per acre per year—however, *I* am much more interested in *profits per decade* per acre, and even more interested in *profitability per century per acre*." Les further notes that the accounting for tillage-based systems needs to include costs for soil erosion as well as "mining" the soil's OM—both of which not only rob the soil of productivity, but also produce side effects that are generally considered damaging to the environment—but that these hidden costs of tillage are often blissfully ignored.

With those goals in mind, Les had been looking into no-till, and started experimenting with it in 1995. When his conventional-till wheat crop blew out in the winter of '95/96 (along with much of Kansas' wheat crop that year), "We made the decision to go 100% no-till and haven't looked back." They made that choice based on

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Sims' cotton in heavy residue.

Photo by Matt Hagny.