

Seeing Everything Anew

by Matt Hagny

Kennebec, SD farmer Mike Arnoldy doesn't like to take anything for granted. Whether it's a new piece of equipment, a new crop, a different crop sequence, or what he eats for breakfast, Mike enjoys questioning everything. He views his surroundings with an uncommon lens: always in a new light. While he readily admits to lacking the time to test everything, Mike likes to play with the more promising ideas. Almost 40, Mike says, "I'm not just that young guy trying all these crazy things anymore."

Crazy or not, Arnoldy has been successful, doubling the size of the farm since his dad handed it over to him right out of college. That bit of history isn't exactly typical either, with Mike's dad originally farming at Tipton, KS when he got drafted towards the end of WWII. That brief tenure in the military cost him his leased land, prompting him to look elsewhere for a chance to earn a living. After several other farming ventures and odd jobs, he arrived in Kennebec with basically nothing, and set about pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. Mike continues the tradition, never afraid to forge productivity by his own recipe.

Mike & his dad were introduced to no-till in 1987 by Tim Taylor, a local farmer (and brother of Todd Taylor), and by Dwayne Beck. Mike says they just said a lot of things that made sense, but admits it was a tough sell, especially to his dad: "Here was a successful 75-year-old wheat >>fallow farmer—from Kansas no less—trying to grasp this radical new concept," chuckles Mike. He describes his dad's thought process as he became convinced, "He thought we would for sure have less erosion with no-till. His thinking was that if we go no-till and



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Mike has been essentially 100% no-till since 1990, although during some wet years in the late '90s he ran a tandem disc across some fields very shallow (like 2 inches) to chop up

some residue: "During those wet years, we just produced too much residue, and it was getting in our way—we couldn't get fields planted."

As we looked at fields on a September day in '02, Mike was noticeably upset that some fields (in certain rotations) no longer had enough residue, with the last few dry years not producing as much. Mike's soils are undoubtedly unique and quite challenging to farm—mostly Milboro & Promise clays (80% clay) formed in residuum, with some extreme shrink-swell tendencies—super sticky when wet, yet loose and unstructured at the surface when dry, even in long-term no-till. As moisture varies, those soils go from bubble-gum tackiness to talcum powder fluff with four-inch

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wide cracks—but with a really bad attitude about relinquishing moisture held so tightly by the clay. Regional precip. patterns that bring abundant moisture in the spring, plus a narrow planting window (short growing season), make springtime seeding of these soils a lesson in frustration.



Photo by Mike Arnoldy.

Mike Arnoldy's planting rig. The air cart delivers (separately) two fertilizer products to the planter. Filling and planting efficiency in Mike's operation is measured in minutes, not hours or days.