

# Leading Edge

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No·till  
On The Plains

## The Bottom Line

by Matt Hagny

The understated manner of Ralph Holzwarth belies the fiery ambition that drives the man to continually search for ways of doing things better, yet more simply. For this Gettysburg, SD grain farmer, too many things are a distraction from the true task at hand: high profitability over the long haul.



Ralph explains, “First, we had to get comfortable with the fact that we were no-tilling. That took us ten years. Now we’re looking at fine-tuning—changing rotations, changing fertilizer methods, and so on.”

Again, typically understated, humble Ralph. He’s been feverishly revamping rotations and fertilizer methods from the first years of his no-till adoption, it’s just that now he’s got a better handle on the system and isn’t so pressured to react to the latest crisis.

Ralph’s area has traditionally been very low in its cropping intensity due to dry conditions, and during the ’70s and ’80s nearly everyone summerfallowed at least 25% of their land, sometimes with it consuming as much as 50% of the landscape. Ralph explains bringing this mentality into his no-till, “[Initially] I didn’t think we could drop the fal-

low. But Beck was already preaching back then that we didn’t need the fallow.” Still, Ralph is a good student of numbers: “After we saw the big chemical bill [from chem-fallow], we knew we couldn’t afford it—not without some big yield improvements. Our continuous-crop [non-fallow] wheat was as good as our fallow wheat in ’92, and we’ve never had an acre of fallow since.”

Holzwarth has been evolving his rotations ever since his first no-till efforts, which started getting serious in 1989 when he rented a JD 750 drill, and then purchased his own 15-foot 750 the following year. Back then, his rotation was often spring wheat >>w. wheat >>sunflower (or corn, or chem-fallow). This was during a time when his county was pre-



Photo by Ralph Holzwarth.

Holzwarth’s air drill seeding spring wheat in sunflower stubble.

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