Controlling His Destiny

by Matt Hagny

Josh Lloyd wasn't the kid who always wanted to farm. In fact, he largely ignored it during his college years: "I was going to go make my millions elsewhere, but eventually I realized being my own boss wasn't so bad." He studied business at K-State, so when he suddenly decided to go into farming with his dad, it was all new. Josh had certainly helped out with farm labor over the years, but never took much interest in what happened when, or why, until he returned to the farm in '98—and suddenly needed to know!

Josh's inquisitiveness during that first year back prompted him to ask why they weren't doing continuous no-till. Josh's father, Gale, had been experimenting with no-till but was having trouble getting over the hurdle of 'this is the way we've always done it.' Mostly no-till was still a crazy idea, though. They'd heard of only a couple success stories in the region. Josh's father had attended the '97 No-Till on the Plains conference in Salina, and suggested they attend the January '99 rendition of the conference. Apparently it was quite convincing, since Lloyds went 100% no-till that spring.

Lloyds already had decent crop diversity in place, with wheat, milo, and soybeans grown on their farm southwest of Clay Center, KS well before no-till came along. The main issues in Josh's mind for converting to no-till were: 1) getting the seed planted properly, 2) figuring out how to fertilize no-till effectively, and 3) doing the weed control. Josh got busy searching for answers.

Following the example of a few other successful no-tillers in the area, Lloyds' starting point for a no-till drill was the Deere single-disc opener, specifically, a 15-foot JD 1560 box drill. That quickly got traded for a 30-foot 1860 air drill—"It seemed like I spent all summer on the tractor with the fifteen-foot drill. I didn't want to work that hard." Eventually that air drill got traded for their current 1890 on 7.5-inch spacing.

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Solutions to Josh's question on no-till fertilization continue to be developed on their farm. Lloyds' program currently uses dry pop-up applied with the air drill for wheat and milo, plus additional fertilizer during the winter. They also apply hog manure from a neighbor's hog barn. The manure is injected about 6 inches deep on 36-inch spacing, and while the applicator does disturb some soil, the main problem they've faced is wheat lodging in the year following the application. Josh is going to try using milo for the first crop after the manure application, although lodging could still be a problem in it as well. Josh notes that he could reduce the rate of hog manure, but he wants to get as much out there in one shot as possible: "I only want to apply to a field once every 5 or 10 years. The applicator disturbs the soil more than I'd like, plus the weight of the wagon with all that liquid manure on board creates some compaction issues."

Lloyds quickly figured out they needed to be doing all their own herbicide application, which is accomplished with a 3440 Spra-Coupe. Hiring their application work proved to be too costly, and timeliness was unsatisfactory much of the time. "Getting things sprayed on time makes a big impact as far as how much chemical to use, level of control, and yield reduction caused by letting the weeds get too big in-crop. Hiring it done also meant that we had to buy the chemical from them. So not being at someone else's mercy was another factor." Josh roughly calculates that for $3/a

Photo by Josh Lloyd.

Josh strives for precise placement of his wheat seed, while preserving as much residue as possible.