

Some Assembly Required

by Matt Hagny

The instructions are in a foreign language, with a corner missing, no pictures, and you're not even sure all the necessary parts are in the box. That's much how Brian Berns felt about no-till during the late '80s and most of the '90s. Yet he had seen the moisture savings from the outset, and knew the water could be translated to yield and profit. He persisted, and now the new contraption is doing what it should.



On a regular basis, the Berns tribe reinvents their operation, located some 25 miles southwest of Hastings, NE. As Brian's dad "retired"—sort of—and Brian's brother, Keith, returned to the farm (after a 10-year stint of teaching high-school vo-ag morphed into a computer technology career), they found opportunities in extensive custom seeding with their no-till drill. Plus, they've put up 5 center pivots in the last 4 years, having had only a smidge of furrow irrigation before that. The changing workforce and economic opportunities forced them to repeatedly tailor their rotations and agronomic practices to fit those needs.

Brian started farming in '88—just in time for a bad drought. That experience quickly taught him the value of moisture, and his reaction was to try preserving a field of wheat stubble to plant to corn in '89—the "ecofallow"

program developed in western KS and NE. That no-till corn in '89 was a success for Brian and his dad, and quickly led them to experiment with no-till seeding of wheat into corn and milo stalks. They rented a 15-foot Deere 750 drill from SCS (NRCS) for a couple years, eventually buying it when the rental program was discontinued.

Corn in itself was a bit of a change for the Bernses, who did mostly wheat >>milo >>summerfallow, or wheat >>milo >>milo >>fallow back in their tillage days. Brian explains, "Before 1990, very little dry-

land corn was grown in this area." Embarking on the no-till adventure had Brian in search of information, sending him to

Lessiter's National No-till Conf. in '92. "You'd go to a conference and hear all these ideas, and then try to figure out if any of it would work for us."

Still, the pieces weren't exactly falling into place, and Brian continued to do some tillage in the fallow year of the rotation, as well as on the flood irrigation (to ease rebuilding the furrows each year). By '95 he was getting fairly close to continuous no-till on the land he farmed, even though his dad was a little slower to totally convert his land. Even after Keith returned to the farm in '98, they occasionally "disked fields going to second-year wheat, and silly stuff like that," remarks Keith sarcastically—reflecting the dramatic change in their thinking. By 2000, they were 100% no-till, and the tillage equipment got sold during their dad's retirement sale in '01. Keith notes the helpful change in attitude: "It's amazing. When the tillage equipment isn't there, you don't even consider it. Before it was always tempting to use it, even if you knew all you were doing was a temporary fix."

**On surface-applied side-dressing under pivots:
"Streaming isn't a risk at all."**

Dryland Practices

"Corn into wheat stubble is our #1 money-maker," notes Brian, "A combination of 'Freedom to Farm' ['96 Farm Bill] and no-till has allowed us to go heavier into corn." And



Photo by Brian Berns.

Bernses' irrigated corn in soybean stubble. The mulch covering the soil improves irrigation efficiency substantially.