

# A Few More Steps Forward

by Matt Hagny

*The original story on Craig & Gene Stehly appeared in the Sept. '02 issue.*



From drowning to drought, all in the same year—sounds like farming on the Plains, in this case, eastern South Dakota. Finding a successful path among the weather extremes is a challenge, and Craig Stehly knows it: “You learn something one year, and it might be a valuable lesson. Or you might never want to think about it again [because it was such a fluke]. We keep trying to go down the middle of the road and ignore the extremes.”

Stehlys already had 13 years of 100% no-till under their belts in '02, so another 5 years doesn't find them making radical changes, but they've fine-tuned a few things. In an area where corn and soybeans are the only crops for most people, Stehlys still like to have nearly a third of their acres in wheat. Craig says, “You can see the [beneficial] effects of wheat in the rotation 3 or 4 years later.”

The Stehlys' top rotations are:

1) (spring or winter) wheat >>w.wht >>corn >>soy >>corn >>soy;  
2) wht >>w.wht >>corn >>corn >>soy >>soy; and, 3) wht >>corn >>soy. They have a few variations also, such as when only a single wheat crop is grown followed by 4 years of corn and soybeans. Craig likes the pure stacked rotation (#2) especially for the benefits to the wheat: “Wheat absolutely detests corn residue—even year-and-a-half-old corn residue. So the two years of beans is great for wheat. The tough part of that rotation is the corn on corn, especially in narrow [22-inch] rows.” But Craig says they've been

making it work with GPS guidance, and now auto-steer, to keep the new rows between the old rows. “We're getting better at it, and we've got better options for seed now, if you can handle the residue [with the planter].” Not always easy in an area where corn sometimes gets 10-ft tall and barely decomposes over the winter. Stehlys run Groff row cleaners, and Craig considers row cleaners absolutely essential for planting 2d-yr corn (or for corn into wheat stubble) in their climate.

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Stehlys have continued to experiment with cover crops in wheat stubble that's slated for corn the next year. They're now in their second year using canola + lentil mixes, and they like that program better than vetch, sunflowers, and various other species they've tried. Craig insists that they have flexibility in the planting window for the cover crops, since they never know when they'll have moisture to get them started. Currently, they're planting 5 lbs/a of winter canola (bin-run, cleaned) + 10 lbs/a of spring lentil in early August. “The cover-crop concept is right, and most things we've tried have worked. But some work better than others; it's just a matter of getting the details right. One of the biggest mistakes we were making early on was not planting them thick enough to get a good canopy and get them to use up some water.”

Having too much water at corn planting is a common hazard for Stehlys—they're in a 'prairie pot-hole' region without much slope for natural drainage, and no opportunity to run drain tile. They've learned to manage the problem. Even in '07, which was an exceptionally wet spring, the Stehlys got all their corn planted (with good stands), even in the stacked wheat stubble. Part of their success is being set up to plant in wetter conditions: Craig attributes less mud behind the gauge wheels to three items: air-bag down-pressure on their new 32-row DB central-fill planter, thicker (3.5-mm) opener blades, and R-K Products' hardened seed tube guards.

While Stehlys put down pop-up fertilizer blends in the seed row with both the drill and the planter, the bulk of their fertilizer still goes out as a dry blend broadcast on the surface in early spring. Craig admits the shortcomings, “There's no easy answer. We definitely tie up some in the residue. . . . I don't see any good way to put it in the ground. We have too many wet spring [seasons]. We could pull [an air cart] behind the planter, but we've already got a [big tracked] Cat on the planter. And side-dressing with a coultter is out of the question—it'd turn wet and you wouldn't get it done and then you're screwed.” Craig thinks that encapsulated urea for their preplant broadcast application will be the future for them, and is cautiously implementing variable-rate applications.

Craig assesses their direction: “You keep hearing about no-till yield drag in the farm magazines. But it sure as hell doesn't happen here.” —Perhaps it's no surprise that the shrewd Stehlys figured this out long ago. 🌱