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by the Editors

TECHNIQUE

Kent Stones, farming between Cawker City, KS and the Nebraska border, had his eye on no-till beginning in the mid-1990s. To set the stage for no-till, he deep ripped almost all his acres in '95 and '96 before going 100% no-till in '97. Stones comments, "Back then, there was lots of talk about ripping—in those days, it was stressed that you needed to prepare for no-till by addressing compaction layers, incorporating lime, and so forth. And to some extent, we were still coping with a bad harvest in '93 with combine rutting, et cetera, so we were still making corrections from that debacle."

Since then, Stones has continued to add many different tracts to his operation, converting them all to no-till, but without any deep ripping. Has he seen a difference?—"No. Some fields are not measuring up to our expectations, but some of those

are fields that were ripped. My conclusion is that long-term there was no advantage to ripping. But there is a definite advantage to longer-term no-till. There's a huge difference between no-till 10 years versus new to no-till."

Stones further reports: "2007 produced our highest ever milo yields. There was about a 25-bu/a advantage to long-term no-till. The continuous no-till just gets better and better. And it was observably better than fully tilled or skip-a-till in our neighborhood—there was enough visual difference that many people noted it, and are asking questions."

In another observation, Stones comments that he doesn't think no-till 'matures' in 20 years, as has been stated by some. Stones has a field that was converted from CRP ten years ago, going directly into no-till production, so it has 20 years without tillage: "That field gets better every year. And it was horrible land before going into CRP—badly eroded, poor farming practices, you name it."

Digging Yourself Deeper

From a completely different region, Pat Sheridan conveys his experiences with old lakebed soils in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan, near Lake Huron. These soils typically have high pH and high clay (but with scattered sandbars), and very low organic matter (0.5%) prior to no-till. In the '70s, the Sheridans went from moldboard plowing to chiseling to address a compaction layer: "[But] instead of compaction at 8 inches, we moved the problem deeper by

a few inches with the chisel. By the early '80s, we thought we could do some good by getting below the layer formed by the chisel. We were trying to run a v-ripper at 14 – 16 inches [deep]. Really boiling the soil, and we had some dry falls to get over lots of ground. Then we had 26 inches of rain in September of 1986. With that much rain, we just had soup down to the compaction layer [wherever tillage had been done]. We left some fields unharvested. . . . As we're very slow learners, we still went out on the frost that fall trying to repair all the messes we had with some aggressive tillage."

Sheridan: "With deep tillage, followed by wet harvests, we were driving compaction deeper all the time. We were chasing our tails trying to use deep tillage to repair problems that were ultimately caused by deep tillage."



Photo by Josh Lloyd.

Natural ripping on Josh Lloyd's farm in north-central Kansas. This piece of lath went nearly three feet down in this crack without being forced.