

Successful Navigating

by Matt Hagny

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Kevin Wiltse, farming northwest of Great Bend, KS, checks the indicators again: Yep, his no-till program is still on course, even if a few adjustments of direction are required at times. Wiltse has largely adhered to his rotational track of a few years ago, wht >>wht >>milo >>milo >>soy, although now he says, “I’m pretty well convinced we need something growing after the 2d-year wheat. There’s eleven months until the milo gets planted—our soils can’t hold 12 inches of water, let alone the 24 inches we normally get in 11 months. . . . We have too much erosion in that carryover wheat stubble, basically because the soil profile gets full and can’t hold any more.”

So Kevin’s been trying double-crop milo as well as sudan taken as hay (“We swathed it a foot off the ground and there’s still good residue from it”), which is fed to his dad’s cattle. Kevin wonders whether to dramatically scale up the dc milo, or some assortment of double-crops for grain, or whether a cover crop would be better. But he knows he must grow something.

The only other weakness in Kevin’s current rotation has been the 2 years of milo, where weed control has become problematic, particularly triazine/ALS-resistant Palmer pigweeds (each plant resistant to both modes of action). Accordingly, he may drop back to a single year of full-season milo at least on some fields. He’s none too eager to shorten his rotation, but considers this a temporary measure until better choices come along: drought-resistant corn, better

milo herbicides, or some ‘new’ crop. He’s also considering rotations such as wht >>wht/dc milo >>soy >>milo >>soy, which may have merit. “I’m just amazed at how much effect crop rotation has. It’s a very powerful tool.”

Wiltse’s area hit a dry spell last fall (’07), and almost none of their wheat plantings had made a stand before winter set in. Kevin notes, “The summerfallow guys didn’t get their wheat up either, and we took 20- to 30-bu/a soybeans off ours. Most years it pays to grow *something*. Even in the drought we cropped every acre, every year, and we never got hurt too bad. And the payoff is huge in the good years compared to wheat >>fallow.” For that broadleaf niche, Kevin strongly prefers soybeans over sunflowers, and wants to revisit field peas as an option.

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Wiltse is now further intensifying his rotation.**

In the spring of ’07, Wiltse tried running a DMI coulter-injection tool for applying their N and S in growing wheat and ahead of milo, as well as side-dressing 6-inch dc sudan. The tool cuts a very narrow slot and squirts in the liquid stream (no knife), which Kevin set to a depth of about 1.5 – 2 inches. He left some strips where the N was on the surface, but saw no difference in yield, although, “It rained a lot this spring, so anything probably would’ve worked.” One

thing he doesn’t like is the additional tracks in the field, stubble breaking off, and more erosion, which was especially noticeable in the applicator wheel tracks.

Wiltse also apply liquid fertilizer with a pop-up system on their 40-ft Deere 1890 CCS, usually running some blend of 10-34-0 and zinc on wheat, milo, and similar crops. Kevin is adamant about the need to aggressively fertilize for top yields, and he suspects an additional 5 bu/a in wheat yields from applying sulfur, as well as much darker, healthier, and more uniform wheat. The late spring freeze greatly damaged their ’07 wheat, but Kevin notes that 30-bu/a wheat would drop to single digits on strips without pop-up! Kevin says, “I can’t believe people even try to no-till wheat without pop-up.”

Wiltse trade Patriot sprayers every five years, and their next one will come with wider tires to minimize soil damage. Kevin notes, “This spring we had more erosion—it really washed in the sprayer tracks. And I try not to drive in the same tracks—ever—when going up and down hills. That’s just asking for trouble, even if the field is terraced.” Along those lines, Kevin sees a substantial reduction in soil damage from cattle grazing on a live root mass versus dead plant material (e.g., milo stalks); grazing can result in more runoff and erosion if they aren’t careful. And in general, Kevin says, “I’m more convinced than ever that we need to be diligent about growing more residue and keeping it. The more residue, the better.” Overall, he says, “The economics of no-till are paying off. And it’s good for the soil. . . . My biggest concern right now is finding a double-crop or cover crop after the 2d wheat.” 🌿