

Making It Pay

by Matt Hagny

Back in the mid-'90s, a name and face familiar on the no-till speaking circuit in Kansas and Colorado belonged to Ron Jacques' (jah-kwes), whose farm was almost entirely no-till in the early '90s, and has been 100% continuous no-till (except for newly acquired fields) since 1995 when 'Freedom to Farm'—the new U.S. Farm Bill—eliminated penalties for crop rotation. In the heart of monoculture wheat country about 10 miles south of Hutchinson, KS, Ron had already rediscovered (in the '80s) the value of crop rotation, and was finding crops other than wheat to be quite profitable, especially when no-tilled.

Ron recalls his message back then: "I really downplayed wheat. But we had excellent summer rains from '95 through '97, so milo and soybeans were much more profitable for us than wheat." He continues, "But we weren't doing anything different in our no-till wheat than what we used to do in tillage. We used the same seeding rate—60 lbs/a—and the same fertilizer plan." Ron describes sitting in on a session on wheat management (by two Kansas no-till farmers) in 2000, when, "The light came on: We needed to manage our wheat differently in no-till." So he and his sons, Eric and Ryan, upped their wheat seeding rate and fertilizer, and picked up 20 bu/a in yield increase the first year (and essentially ever since).

During the mid-'90s, crop rotation on the Jacques farm (dryland, except for 3 pivots) was typically wheat/ dc milo >>milo >>soybeans, but occasionally with dryland corn instead of milo, or with single-crop sunflowers instead of soybeans. Ron reflects, "The rotation worked good in those years." Then the drought hit. Ron says, "1998 to '04 were some of the worst years this farm has ever experienced for fall crops." Corn and soybeans were often disastrous; the single-crop milo somewhat better. Because of input costs, they concluded that milo, soybeans, and especially corn,



were riskier than wheat; Ryan comments, "In '03 and '04, we bailed on some rotations due to economics." Plus, Jacqueses were really struggling to control triazine/ ALS-resistant Palmer pigweeds with that much milo in their rotation (this was before Lumax was labeled for milo).

About that time, 'stacking' of no-till wheat (2 consecutive years, preceded by at least 2 years without wheat, rye, or triticale) was becoming popular in the region, and this technique proved to be an excellent fit for Jacqueses. Ryan says, "Stacked wheat is one of the best moves we ever made." Reacting to their weed-control problems, they substituted double-crop soybeans for the dc milo, creating a rotation of wht >>wht/ dc soys >>milo >>soys,

which they've used on most of the farm since '02. (Occasionally, they grow wheat 3 years in a row on fields with very poor soils, with Ron noting

"Wheat will respond to intensive management."

that 3d-yr wheat still yields okay although 'cheatgrass' pressure gets bad.) Except for a few episodes of crop loss due to flooding, Ron says their double-crop beans have been quite consistent, never yielding below 17 bu/a even in the most droughty years. And despite the return of more favorable weather patterns, the Jacqueses just can't get corn to yield with milo, and rarely plant corn



Photo by Ron Jacques.

Seeding wheat on the Jacques farm: "Stacked wheat is one of the best moves we ever made."