

The Payoff

by Matt Hagny

Holzwarth was the cover story for the Sept. '04 issue.



As of our '04 interview, Ralph Holzwarth (Gettysburg, SD) was doing well, and his careful positioning—both in technology as well as long rotations and good agronomy—is now paying off nicely. Says Ralph, “Our yields keep going up. . . . We’re a lot more aggressive with our yield goals now: We try to push a little harder with the inputs. And we’re trying to stretch the rotations.”

Ralph tries to be in wheat only 2 years out of 5, instead of 2 out of 4. Although he was already doing some of this in '04, the longer rotation now encompasses most of his acres. And on some of his best soils, he’s pushed it out to a 6-year rotation, such as corn >>field pea >>corn >>soy >>s.wheat >>w.wheat. His 5-year rotation is stacked wheat, stacked corn, then either sunflower or soybean. “We’re growing more soybeans now: The yields are getting better. Sunflowers fill in on the fields that are rocky.” As for the field peas, “We only have 7 or 8% of our acres in peas. The last two springs ['09 & 2010], it was too wet to get them planted into wheat stubble, so we had to jump out of that. Our peas only go into corn stalks now.”

The long rotational breaks provide advantages, as Ralph describes, “If I stay out of wheat for 3 – 4 years, I’m thinking we have a 5 – 10 bu/a yield increase.” He also reports that his 2d-year corn is ‘only’ 5 – 10 bu/a less than his corn into wheat stubble, which he finds entirely satisfactory in the scheme of things, since it requires less investment (no wheat

stubble to keep clean in the fall), and allows more time away from wheat. ‘Cheatgrass’ continually motivates Ralph to stretch the rotations, and in one case he did 6 consecutive years of corn, soybeans, and peas to get a field cleaned up. His cropping intensity, and yields, are astonishing for an area that was 1/3 summerfallow a mere 20 years ago.

Holzwarth is now precision on everything—auto-steer, RTK, variable-rate (VR) phosphorus and N on wheat & corn, plus VR population on corn. He has about half his fields zoned. “We’ve gotten pretty aggressive with planting rates for corn: We push for 120 – 180 bu/a [avg. 155], and we’ve hit it the last few years. But not every year,” he hastens to add. He says they won’t make those yields in 2010, having not had any rain since the 4th of July. He recounts the tough years, “It was so dry in '06, nothing much mattered anyway. The corn completely burned up. It was so dry, we only harvested about half our wheat that year.” He continues, “I’m sure glad we had no-till, or else the whole countryside woulda blowed away.” (His county is over 90% no-till, among the highest in the nation.)

Ralph uses a JD 1895 drill with a 3-tank cart to apply most of his N for wheat at seeding, which works well in his climate. All his spring wheat also gets stream-bar N with the sprayer to get higher protein in the grain. He runs Cargill’s MESZ (all granules contain N, P, S, and Zn) for pop-up on both wheat and corn (towing the cart behind the planter

to supply the dry fertilizer). Ralph intends to fine-tune his fertilizer program further: “We’ve been doing some leaf analysis to figure out what we’re missing.” As a result, he’s now using boron, and experimenting with copper. (On a related note, his better soils are now up to 4.5 – 5.0% OM in the upper 6 inches.)

Ralph’s planter setup hasn’t changed much, but the interesting thing is that everyone in his area who’d converted to 20-inch spacing has abandoned it: “They just can’t get the residue to flow, especially on rows with transport wheels.” He doesn’t want to create ‘self-directed’ problems: “When I’m trying to get things done in the field, I don’t want to be plugging. Why do that to yourself?”

Ralph comments that he’s gone to a Shelbourne stripper head, which would further aggravate residue flow for planting corn into heavy winter wheat stubble. But he

further notes that cover crops might solve the problem: “They’ve got a lot of merit—something that I strongly think we need to fit into the farm. The concept makes a lot of sense.” (He dabbled with covers this year.)

Ralph emphasizes the progress in his 2 decades of no-till: “Things work a lot better than 10 or 20 years ago: We don’t bog down in wet soils. Equipment has gotten better—more options.”

Ralph’s farm has continued to expand significantly in recent years, with Ralph’s incisive weighing of risks and rewards, and willingness to push the envelope. Ralph & Betty’s son, Ted, returned to the farm in '09, and Ralph thinks this is quite a payoff in itself. 🌱

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