

Long Odds Yet

by Matt Hagny

Mindemann was the cover story of the March '05 issue.



For Alan Mindemann, a true pioneer of no-till cropping in south-west Oklahoma, 2011 has been harsh. Not just the worst drought on record—he also is losing a fair chunk of his rented cropland (due to circumstances, not his farming methods). Yet, he sees opportunity. A mirage, you ask?

“Looking back at my farming history, some of the highest returns I’ve ever had were in drought years. We always caught the one rain [to make a crop],” says Alan. That didn’t happen in 2011, although he thinks he has some cotton to harvest where he caught an inch (total) of rain since planting (starting with a full profile of moisture, in wheat/dc milo stubble). Alan’s corn & milo failed, but he had perfect stands—while most in the neighborhood didn’t get a stand on any summer crops. As for his usual sesame acres, “I never had a chance to plant it. I would’ve had to plant 2 inches deep to get to moisture, and sesame won’t come from that depth.” He did eek out about 1/3 of a wheat crop.

In Sept., Alan’s big concern was lack of moisture to establish a cover crop: “I’m going backwards on residue.” In general, he plans for more seed-wheat acres for 2012. For production, “Wheat’s the surest bet”—although he questions the validity of his statement, noting very poor wheat crops in ’06 (drought), ’07 (flood), ’09 (late freeze), and drought again in 2011. “My summer crops and double-crops saved my butt in those years, but not this year.”

Several things Alan won’t compromise on, regardless of weather and other duress: “I won’t pasture wheat. Let’s put it this way: I won’t plant wheat early enough to pasture. It’s just asking for trouble with Hessian fly.” Nor on crop nutrition: “Shorting your fertility program is a dead-end road.”

Alan now has on-farm storage for liquid N, which lets him buy ahead. This, his only N source, is stream-applied with his Apache sprayer. P fertilizer goes on as 18-46-0, either with his 30-ft JD 1890 as pop-up, or surface broadcast. Some crops put in with his 16-row planter get 10-34-0 via Keetons.

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Alan applies zinc sulfate aggressively—usually with his wheat pop-up—and b’casts potassium chloride (0-0-60) on sandy soils. In targeting soil pH of 5.5 – 6.0, he assiduously applies lime (calcitic), although only 1 – 2 tons/a/yr, regardless of the lab’s recommendation—he’s had trouble with larger amounts reducing yields (inducing micronutrient deficiencies, etc.).

Alan routinely uses gypsum (calcium sulfate) for sulfur, noting that his soil tests show sulfate-S of 40 – 50 ppm for many years after the application, versus ~ 10 – 20 ppm otherwise. “Grandpa always talked about everyone using gypsum on the ‘red land’ to make tillage easier. They applied it every few years.” Yet Alan has no target level for calcium in his soil;

he simply applies 1 t/a of gypsum when he needs sulfur—about every 8 – 10 yrs. “It’s a cheap source of sulfur, and it does improve soil structure.” He adds, “Our gypsum source [quarried] has a lot of copper and other micros in it.”

In the past 7 years, “Double-cropping replaced almost all my cover-cropping.” Alan typically grows milo after wheat or canola harvest, although he’s also done dc corn, soybeans, sunflowers, and sesame. Alan was an avid corn grower in ’03 – 2010, due to the \$0.80 – 1.00 premium over milo, but now that they’re on par, he opts mostly for milo: “Similar yields, but milo is cheaper to put in.”

Alan was ‘gonzo’ on winter canola for a few years, to the tune of 800 a/yr, plus buying a pusher to artificially lodge the crop just prior to maturity, as an alternative to swathing. But his crop often wasn’t thick enough to make the plants interlock with the pusher (some areas of fields wouldn’t grow out normally in the spring, and he hasn’t figured out why). So, in ’09 & 2010, he simply returned to sesame (grain) as more lucrative and user-friendly than canola.

During the worst drought on record, with no end in sight (as of Sept. 2011), Alan’s still eager to regain his acre base for 2012. (Risk-averse, he isn’t.) On whatever new land Alan acquires, he’s no longer interested in deep-ripping: “It causes more problems than it helps. Ripping causes rutting, and then you gotta till the ruts. *Tillage begets tillage*. Now, I try to let the soil heal itself—and I can help that along with cover crops.” 🌱