

Operation Strip-Till: Try Before You Buy

Two farm suppliers launch a program to give farmers first-hand experience with strip-tillage.



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The complete Operation Strip-Till system lined up in a field ready to be worked. Operation Strip-Till covered more than 5,500 acres last fall.

“Learning together” is the mission statement of a new program initiated by a Webster County, Iowa, strip-till equipment dealer and a local farmer.

“Operation Strip-Till” was launched in 2008 by Dave Nelson, owner of Brokaw Supply Co., and Doug Seltz, a county soil and water district commissioner. Nelson and his father Gary work 1,200 acres, 160 of which are the Smeltzer, Trust Demonstration Farm, one of the Iowa Learning Farm projects of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Seltz farms another 1,600 nearby acres.

“Brokaw Supply Co., which dad and I bought in January 2008, sells BLU-JET strip-till equipment. We wanted to try strip-till on our farm but felt we didn’t have enough acres to justify the investment in a machine. So, after brainstorming

with Doug, we came up with a program to offer local farmers a way to try strip-till on a portion of their acres and at the same time amortize some of the upfront costs.”

Soils in the area stay cooler and wetter in the spring than the rest of Iowa and this has slowed the adoption of no-till. Strip-till is seen as a way to get a warmer and drier seedbed along with the advantages of reduced soil disturbance.

“As good as it sounds, nothing will make a bigger impact with farmers than seeing strip-till work in their own fields,” Nelson says.

The first step was an Operation Strip-Till seminar held in March 2008 where Kevin Kimberley, an independent Iowa ag consultant and farmer, gave a “do’s and don’ts of strip-till” talk and three experienced local strip-tillers related their in-field experiences.

The program attracted a lot of interest. "We had support from Iowa State Extension, the NRCS, Webster County Conservation Districts, Midwest Agronomic Professional Services (MAPS) and Iowa Soybean Assn. By the end of the meeting, 1,200 acres were committed," Nelson recalls.

Nelson and Seltz each bought a strip-till machine equipped with an AgLeader Insight monitor for variable rate application of anhydrous, on-the-go blending of dry phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) with a Montag fertilizer system and N-Serve injection. The tractors are equipped with Trimble Auto Pilot systems for 2-4 inch accuracy.

"The more accurately we can place the strips, the easier it will be for the farmers to plant back on those strips next spring," Nelson notes.

In August, Operation Strip-Till sponsored a field demonstration to allow local producers and participating growers to see first hand the equipment that would be used on their farms in late fall.

"About 175 producers showed up to see the strip-till machines at work in oat stubble. It was a real indicator of the high level of interest across north central Iowa. We

"Nothing makes an impact with farmers like seeing strip-till work in their own fields..."

also discussed the soil conservation benefits of the system and how technology improves overall accuracy. While we don't promise higher yields, we do promise comparable yields at lower cost," Nelson comments.

The Operation Strip-Till Team was also on hand with one of their machines at the Iowa State Univ. extension building during the Farm Progress Show.

Last fall, Operation Strip-Till covered more than 5,500 acres, applying anhydrous ammonia, dry P and K and N-Serve for a \$25 per acre fee. Because local co-ops have provided a grid sampling program to a 9-county area, most of the growers used existing field maps to identify the area of a field on which they wanted to test strip-till.

"We loaded all the data into our software and headed for the selected fields. It was that simple," Nelson says. "At first the \$25 per acre fee seemed like a lot of money. But with a quick cash flow analysis, a spreadsheet of equipment costs, fuel expense and labor shows that for corn-on-corn, they were still saving \$30 per acre vs. the cost of conventional tillage. And that doesn't include any potential fertilizer savings from better placement," he says.

With the local success of Operation Strip-Till, Nelson and Seltz have taken the program to other parts of the state to encourage similar programs.



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