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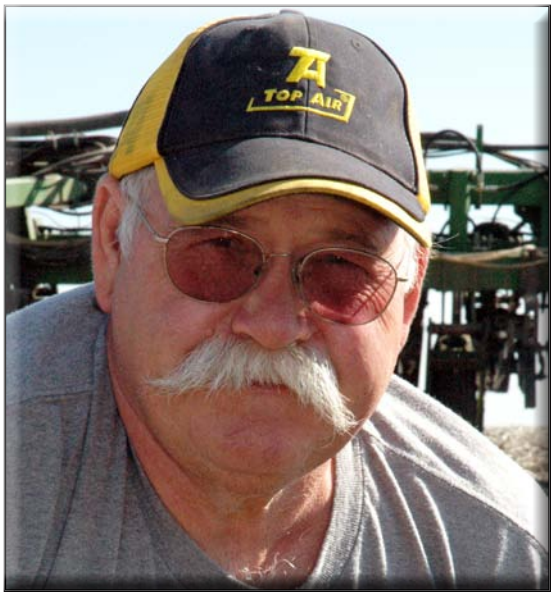
Jensen Succeeds with Spring Strip-till

Simultaneous strip-till, fertilizer application and planting is the right springtime combination for Fayette County corn and soybean producer Collin Jensen, who saves fuel, reduces soil erosion, improves soil quality and lessens compaction by farming this way.

With his program, Jensen says, "You can cut back on equipment, machinery, fuel and man hours per acre compared to conventional farming, and at the same time lose less soil. What else are you looking for?"



Collin Jensen

His Land

Jensen, who owns and rents 1,800 acres on several northeast Iowa farms, needs to manage for several soil types. Some of his soils are heavier, sit on flatland and drain poorly – typical of wet spring conditions. His other soils are more typical of the area – better draining soils that sit on steeper slopes.

Besides minimal sub-soiling Jensen leaves crop residue untouched until planting time. That's when he uses Yetter Sharktooth® trash whippers to prepare the soil for planting. He uses a 24-row planter, and plants rows 20 inches apart at a 1¼-2 inch depth.

Collin Jensen is able to simultaneously cut a strip, plant and fertilize in the spring. This practice saves him money, helps reduce erosion, lessens compaction, and improves soil quality.

He says the trash whippers handle crop residue very well. "I've planted like this for 25 years, and I've tried several types of trash whippers. I have been very successful with the Yetter I have now," he said. "I am able to move the residue enough to find a clear zone."

Fertility Plan

In the fall, Jensen spreads dry chicken litter and performs minimal sub-soiling to help lift compacted areas. In the spring, he applies 18-50 gallons (48-133 lbs.) of 32% N with Dawn® fertilizer coulters at a four-inch depth, ahead of trash whippers while planting.

Jensen performs soil sampling every three to four years, by soil type, to make efficient

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use of his fertilizer. "Most every farm I run I've farmed so long I know where all the old field lines are," he said. "I usually sample five-acre areas."

He says much of his land was moldboard plowed before he began farming it in the 1960s. He reports dramatic increases in organic matter from years of practicing residue management. "In my soils there is a lot of decomposed material. It looks like good stuff you would see in a compost pile," he says. "Over time, the soil at planting depth has built up more structure and doesn't crust easily."

Economic Benefits/Yields
Years of running a high residue cropping system has undoubtedly saved soil for Jensen, but it has also helped improve the quality and performance of his soils. He feels that if he can plant his crops at the same time other farmers do, he has a shot at the same yields everybody else does. "There's give and take – no system is the best every year," he says.

Jensen cuts costs by performing his own fertilizing, planting and harvesting. Since he only makes a couple trips through is fields, he has much lower fuel costs than producers who till conventionally. He says he uses approximately ¾ gallon per acre of fuel annually to fertilize and plant his crops.

Challenges
It is important to plant on the contour in Jensen's system because the stripped area can be susceptible to washing after planting, since rows sit lower than the crop residue. Jensen plants continuous corn on steeper slopes. He says continuous corn helps reduce erosion, particularly during heavy rains, because of the high amount of residue.

Another challenge for Jensen, as with any high residue system, is waiting until soils dry before planting. "Particularly with corn residue, I have to wait longer to get in the field than guys who chisel," he says.

Corn seed is planted at a 1¼-2 inch depth in the clear zone, or strip.

To learn more about strip-till, and what system would work best for you, visit your local NRCS field office today.

Jensen Management Tips

Leave Stalks Standing
Collin Jensen believes it is important to leave cornstalks standing. He calls them the "pipeline by which water gets into the soil." He says corn root mass left untouched holds more soil, and doesn't wash into the ditches. "I like to leave stalks as tall as I can so I don't have more matting than I want on the soil," he says.

Worms Are Your Friend
Earthworms are an important part of Jensen's system. They help improve the quality of his soil by increasing the availability of nutrients, improving physical properties of the soil, moving residue deep inside the soil and enhancing beneficial microorganisms. In addition, earthworm channels help remove excess rainfall and snowmelt.

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