

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Conservation Plan Leads to Better Soil Quality

Harrison County farmer Bill Hammitt says his soil looks as good as potting soil purchased at a garden shop. "My soil is real loose, real mellow and high in organic matter just like potting soil," said Hammitt. "The only difference is my soil has earthworms in it and potting soil doesn't."

The Portsmouth man has worked to build organic matter and improve soil health through conservation practices on his farm for 30 years. He says his long-time efforts provide many benefits. "I feel I am enjoying higher yields because of better soil health. My land has less soil compaction, better water retention and I have less erosion on my farms," he said.

Hammitt says high organic soil is more forgiving and gives him more control over Mother Nature. "When it is wet, organic matter absorbs water and holds the soil so I don't need to worry about erosion when we have night-time thunderstorms. When it is dry, crops take advantage of that same

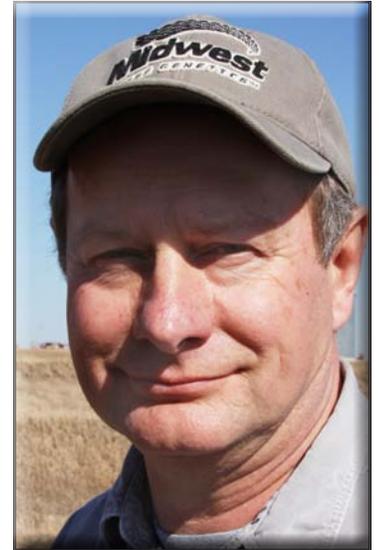
water-holding capacity and continue growing," he said.

"Last summer, no rain fell on our farm from the middle of July to the end of August and we still harvested 200-bushel-

per-acre corn. With everything else being equal, if that had happened in 1988, we would have gotten 75-bushel corn. Improved soil quality simply means more bushels in the bin."

A former USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) district conservationist, Hammitt started farming part-time in 1980. "I was suggesting conservation practices to farmers during the day and farming my own ground nights and weekends. It only made sense I practice on my own land what I was urging farmers to do on theirs. This gave me important first-hand conservation experience which helped me better advise farmers," he said.

One of the practices Hammitt was anxious to try on his 1,500 acres was no-till. "My first farm needed a lot of help," he said. "The soils I have are typical for the Loess Hills; silt loam with moderate to steep slopes. I found the hillsides low on organic matter and badly eroded from years of row



NRCS Soil Conservationist Weston Dittmer and Harrison County farmer Bill Hammitt stand on a terrace between two no-till fields.



CONSERVATION *Showcase*



cropping. I wanted to try no-till so I bought my first no-till John Deere 7000 corn planter in 1982. The yields were good so I bought a soybean drill in 1984.”

Since then Hammitt said equipment, seed and chemicals have all improved. In 1989, he went 100-percent no-till and left full-time NRCS employment.

“I may no longer work for NRCS,” he said, “but I invite NRCS staff to go over my farm on a regular basis. They give me ideas and help me update my conservation plan.”

A fresh pair of eyes often helps him see problems he may miss, he said. “It’s amazing the things you miss because you see the farm every day,” he said. “When we walk my land they can see where a grass end row will cut erosion, they can point to an area where

Hammitt and NRCS Soil Conservationist Weston Dittmer examine a no-till planter.



CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) might work, or they can offer suggestions to improve soil health. NRCS people help me stay profitable and improve my operation.”

NRCS Soil Conservationist Weston Dittmer works with Hammitt. He says he admires Hammitt’s long-term conservation focus. “Hammitt’s conservation plan calls for practices to improve soil quality and the organic content in his fields. He builds terraces, drop structures and uses grassed water ways. He uses high amounts of crop residue to protect the soil against wind and water erosion and to add organic matter to the soil. He minimizes field trips to reduce compaction and he doesn’t till the ground. Bill Hammitt’s conservation plan is working,” he said.

*Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines
May 2009*