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News Release

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This Farmer's Convinced: "Ugly" Fields Have Higher Yields

South Coffeyville, Okla., June 28, 2016—Back in 2009, you couldn't pay Scotty Herriman to try no-till. "Our bottomland is tight, heavy clay," he insisted. "It won't work here."

Scotty has been growing corn, soybeans, wheat and milo on 2,000 acres in Nowata County, Oklahoma for over 50 years, so it's generally wise to take his word when it comes to farming. But Scotty is the first to acknowledge he misjudged no-till. Six years into his total no-till conversion, now he says "it will work here, and I've proved it."

As is the unfortunate truth for many producers, it took a series of disasters to get Scotty to consider changing from the conventional farming practices he had used for decades. He had seen others try no-till as early as the 1970s, but even during the severe drought of 1980-1981, Scotty doubted the cost-effective and water-saving system. He was convinced a chisel was necessary to break up his soil, and the cost of a no-till drill was a gamble that outweighed the potential benefit.

"The drought was tough," he said. "It was hard to get a crop and the banks weren't in your favor. If I look back, we probably went broke twice."

Disaster struck again in 2007 when a major flood drowned his fields. In all, he harvested a meager 13 acres that year. For two more years, Scotty fought nature and rising fuel prices by pulling a chisel behind his tractor. A visit to his local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office in 2010 finally changed his mind. He learned he could use assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to switch to no-till. Just like that, decades of conventional farming went out the window.

"We switched overnight," Scotty said.

After the first no-till planting, Scotty's wife, Jo, described the farm as the ugliest in the county—referring to the crop residue that is intentionally left on the soil surface to protect the soil from erosion and temperature extremes. But the results are undeniable: the Herriman's have cut equipment and fuel costs and reduced fertilizer usage in certain crops. Today, both Scotty and Jo have reversed their opinions on "ugly" soil. It's the exposed soil without residue that's really an eyesore.

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Scotty's farm is now a leader in the state for corn yields. In his second year of no-till, he placed first in the no-till/strip till dryland division for Oklahoma in the National Corn Growers Association Corn Yield Contest. He has gone on to place first in that category for four of the past five years. When asked about the typical yield drag associated with converting to no-till, Scotty insists he didn't experience much. While this immediate turnaround won't be experienced by every farmer, producers across the nation can attest to the medium and long term benefits of no-till.

But Scotty isn't done yet. "We want to push the limits of what our land can produce," he said.

After witnessing the successes of other Oklahoma farmers such as Jimmy Emmons and Alan Mindemann, Scotty is integrating cover crops into his no-till system for the first time in 2016. In conjunction with no-till, cover crops help farmers simulate a natural plant ecosystem on cropland, and Scotty believes it's the next step to driving his yields even higher while investing in his soil health. This year's cover crop is made possible through Scotty's partnership with Oklahoma State University (OSU), which was awarded a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) to study what influence various cover crops and crop mixes have on soybean and corn productivity.

"The roots are adding structure and allowing air to get into the soil," said Dr. Jason Warren, OSU soil and water conservation/management extension specialist.

We'll learn more about the impact of that added soil structure and air when Scotty harvests soybeans later this year.

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