

All Crops, May 20, 2003

NO TILL STRIKES AGAIN

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I became a no-till proponent about 6 years ago. It was another horribly wet spring like 2003. It FINALLY dried out enough to do something and we were faced with two choices. Begin reworking our conventional till ground, or go no-till and start planting.

This year the story was similar. We went to the field hoping to rehip some foul beds and then plant conventional till cotton. While it was too wet on our conventional till, our no-till area had ideal moisture. We planted, sprayed a burndown, sprayed some insecticide and went home. We were disappointed because we needed to plant several conventional till plots, but no-till again showed it's utility. The twist for 2003 was that a rain front was coming and almost prevented us from planting any conventional till. Luckily, the front dissipated, but no-till was almost about planting versus not planting.

You can debate whether no till (or conservation till) is the absolute best way to grow things. In the Southeast Missouri flatlands, we can work the ground without fear of water erosion. No till is a bit more tricky, a bit more complicated and yes, can be very scary. But, the payback is a big savings in fuel, labor and equipment. And then there's the occasional defining moment, when there's enough time to plant or till, but not both.

While we don't have water erosion problems, we do have problems with wind and sand blasting. While the extremely sandy areas need a cover crop, a lot of Southeast Missouri can grow a first-class, totally-free cover crop of winter annual weeds. The majority of these weeds are easy to kill and they do an outstanding job of holding the soil. When John Bradley worked at the Milan TN no-till station he always said, "Don't grow a cover crop unless you HAVE to." That is exemplified on our extremely sandy soils that do not support winter weeds. But our loamier soils can usually grow their own cover crop.

While no-till sometimes seems as simple as spraying a burndown and then planting, burndowns can be tricky. Troublesome weeds include curly dock, cutleaf eveningprimrose, smartweed, plains coreopsis, horseweed/mare's tail, ryegrass and sometimes even henbit. Without going into specifics, most of these weeds can be controlled with inexpensive additions to a burndown program.

One final warning, if you do switch to some sort of no-till/stale seedbed, be aware of your surrounding crops and wind conditions when you burndown. We've already had several drift cases this year, and in most cases they could have been avoided.