COLORADO CONSERVATION TILLAGE ASSOCIATION

JOURNAL

www.HighPlainsNoTill.com

Spring Edition 2015

First and foremost, I would like to extend another thank-you to all of our members for showing up and attending the 2015 Conference in Burlington, Colorado. I truly cannot believe how fast time has passed since the conference and now it is time for us to begin planning the next conference that will be held on February 2nd & 3rd of 2016. We have outlined a dynamic set of topics which I think will stimulate many learning opportunities.

As many of us have learned, no-till farming methods have proven to be an effective tool of managing our dryland cropping systems to maximize soil moisture. In the United States, no-till farming is now growing at a pace of about 1.5 percent per year, according to the Department of Agriculture. As of the latest publication that I found from the USDA, nearly 43.7% of American croplands have integrated more minimum tillage and/or no-till farming methods. Cropland erosion in the United States decreased greatly, as the techniques of no-till have became more widely known, and practiced.

Outside of an obvious decrease in soil and erosion, many more farming operations have experienced positive impacts such as water conservation, greater economic returns, and a noticeable improvement in soil biology. In general we have noticed that soil productivity generally improves when the complexity, or diversity, of the soil biological community increases. Sometimes our quest as no-till farms is to find a cropping system that maximizes surface residue as well as revenue generation. In some years, this feels like an impossible task. As the study of soil biology evolves, we have learned that, surface residue encourages the growth rates of a vast community of decomposers. Fungi have been some of the most prominent contributors to increasing soil productivity levels. We want to encourage and promote more fungi to flourish in our soils, as they have some advantages over bacteria in digesting surface residue. Some studies are showing that there is a strong symbiosis between fungi and bacteria that supports the survival of both microorganisms.

Soil biology is an evolutionary process which takes time and dedication to support. Many times I have found my self over-thinking how to increase my own soil's biology. To create diversity, we must farm diversity. The crops that are integrated into our rotation systems all promote different habitats within the soils, thus continually adding more complex environments into the soil. As the technique of cover cropping becomes more calibrated to our western arid growing environment, this will also be a strong promoter of diverse soil biology. During our traditional long fallow periods, most arthropods will emigrate or die of starvation, thus colonies of mycorrhizal fungi also starve and thus our bacterial colonies shrink. I know it is a controversial technique right now, but cover crops help maintain or build diversity by reducing the length of fallow periods at the beginning and end of growing seasons. Cover crops also affect the biological habitat by changing temperature and moisture levels.

I am excited to continue exploring ways to promote diversity, and create more symbiotic opportunities across many microorganisms within our soils. Soil diversity is going to continue to be a topic that we explore in our field days and conferences.

John Fabian
CCTA President

CCTA Board of Directors Officers

John Fabian, President, Windsor, Colorado
john.fabian@monsanto.com
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Scott Smelker, Stratton, Colorado
smlkseeds182@hotmail.com
719-348-5055

Micha Seyler, Secretary, Joes, CO
micah.seyler@monsanto.com
970-597-2229

CCTA Board Members

Kyle Franz, Burlington, Colorado
Kyle.franz@ks.usda.gov
719-349-8067

Haley Harms, Otis, Colorado
Help@ProTill.com
970-466-0721

Jeff Kler, Yuma, Colorado
jeffrey.kler@chsinc.com
970-630-5262

Mike Kochis, Limon, Colorado
mkochis.topqualityag@yahoo.com
719-740-8867

Ron Meyer, Burlington, Colorado
rf.meyer@ColoState.edu
719-349-1101

Nate Northup, New Raymer, Colorado
nathannrthp@gmail.com
970-520-7180

Scott Smith, Cheyenne Wells, Colorado
scott.smith@co.usda.gov
719-342-2902

Michael Thompson, Almena, KS
mt_fhsu@hotmail.com
785-871-1651

Jonathan Wagers, Woodrow, Colorado
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Becky Ravenkamp, Coordinator, Hugo, Colorado
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2016 High Plains No-Till Conference Speakers

Dwayne Beck
Research Manager
Dakota Lakes Research Farm
Pierre, South Dakota
www.DakotaLakes.com

Joshua Dukart
Holistic Educator
Bismark, North Dakota
www.ndglc.com/services

Dwayne Beck has been working in no-till systems at the Dakota Lakes research farm for over 25 years. His main emphasis has been in developing no-till systems for irrigated and dryland areas in Central South Dakota and helping producers profitably adopt those systems.

Farming almost 900 acres with fields spread over substantial distances the research farm mimics the rural farms of America and challenges of both rian fall patterns and changes in soil types . As both a research and production enterprise, Dakota Lakes depends on the farm profits to fund most of the research. This model aligns Dakota Lakes' research closely to real farms.

Taking into account all resource concerns and impacts of farm management techniques is a key operational component at Dakota Lakes. Water resources are always a consideration, but seeing how all farm management choices, including crop selection and rotation, interact can help overcome this concern.

Dwayne Beck will explain the philosophy he uses in managing the farm and the principles you can use in developing a customized system on your farm.

Joshua Dukart is a certified educator of holistic management who integrates these principles into cropping systems. He started as an agricultural and bio-systems engineer but has expanded to working with land managers, families and organizations through the Burleigh County Conservation District, the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition, and his own consultation and speaking business.

Owning and managing livestock of his own and providing grazing, cropping and financial planning for various ranches and farms keeps Joshua directly involved in production agriculture and allows him to share both the conceptual basis and applied techniques of the regenerative agriculture he promotes.

Joshua understands family farms must balance many different aspects. His main goal is to help others achieve a sustainable balance of people, finances and resources. Addressing those aspects can be an overwhelming experience and is often left undone. By using the holistic management framework every farm can identify and achieve their unique goals. At the 2016 High Plains No-Till Conference Joshua will introduce the holistic management framework and hold sessions that will help you apply the ideas when you return home.

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Registration for 2016 booths are included in the sponsorship registration. Registration will open in August for the 2016 High Plains No-Till Conference. Contact Becky Ravenkamp at 719-740-0715. See page 11 for details.

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New CCTA Board Member

Michael Thompson was elected to the CCTA Board of Directors at the annual meeting February 4th in Burlington, CO. Michael Thompson grew up on a diversified farm and ranch located on both sides of the state line in Norton County Kansas and Furnas County Nebraska. Thompson Farm & Ranch consists of 2000 farmed acres and 2000 acres of grassland that is owned and operated by Michael, his brother Brian, and father Richard. The farmland has been 100 percent no-till since 2003. Thompson Farm & Ranch has been using diverse cover crops on the farmland since 2008. The cover crops have been used for living cover as well as forage for the cattle. In 2011 the rangeland was converted to rotational grazing. In 2012 the farm started using high stock density grazing on both cover crops and grass. The past four seasons the area has received less than average rainfall, but the Thompsons have been able to produce enough forage for the cattle and give pastures a rest due to the grazing of cover crops. "There are many financial gains to be had by integration of cover crops into the farming system, even in a dryland environment," Michael states. "By making changes to our farming practices I have been able to change careers and become a full-time no-till farmer."

2016 CCTA Board of Director Vacancy

Due to term limits, there will be a vacancy on the CCTA Board of Directors starting in 2016. Board members are responsible for fiscal management of the association, planning of events and content at those events. It is a great opportunity to expand your no-till network and has led to other opportunities for past members. If you are interested in learning more about becoming a CCTA board member please contact one of the current board members for more information. Elections will be held on Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2016 during the business meeting at the High Plains No-Till Conference.

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CCTA Hosts Local, Regional and International Attendees

The High Plains No-Till Conference has grown from a grass-roots effort to educate ourselves on conservation farming practices to an event worthy of international recognition. It is still the most applicable no-till conference for those farming in the semi-arid region of the High Plains offering information from local producers, University and industry partners on methods and products that are working here. Over one-fifth the 2015 attendees were from Colorado, with many others coming from the surrounding states of Kansas and Nebraska. The reach of the High Plains No-Till Conference doesn't end there; ten states were represented by attendees of the 2015 conference spanning the entire United States from California to Maine. Past President, Curt Sayles, attributes the popularity of the conference to the high calibre of speakers and relevant topics presented at the event. "People all over the United States are interested in these ideas," he said. "Pick up any progressive farming magazine and you will see many of our speakers. They are either featured on the cover or are part of the content every month. We have brought many of them together and people are willing to travel hundreds of miles for the chance to see them in one location."

Driving a few hours or taking a domestic flight shows the attendees want to learn about the science of farming, it was no different with the attendees from South Australia. "This was an excellent conference," said Australian farmer Tom Robinson. He along with nine fellow Australians flew to the United States for no-till education. They are all members of SANTFA, the South Australian No-Till Farmers Association. Led by the SANTFA executive director, the nine farmers attended two no-till conferences and visited several no-till farms on the High Plains.

Ten South Australian no-tillers attended the 2015 High Plains No-Till Conference.

"I was a little bit surprised that we had ten international attendees, I guess I shouldn't have been", Sayles said. "We've set a precedent for high quality speakers and people are noticing."

2015

Highl

Conference ights

2016 Corporate Sponsorship Offer

The CCTA Board of Directors has created a corporate sponsorship level. This sponsorship level will include all the Platinum Sponsor benefits. Corporate sponsors will sign a 4-year contract for the Platinum Sponsors level payable in September of each year. A 10% deposit by August 15th will secure your sponsorship and recognition on pre-conference advertising.

We are offering a special 25% discount for corporate sponsors who sign up for the 2016 conference. 2016 Corporate Sponsors will only pay $3,000 a year for four years for the following benefits:

- **One sponsored breakout session** - $500 value - On one day of the conference you will be scheduled for a 1-hour breakout session. You may promote your products / services or talk about a general no-till topic. Submit speaker information and materials to be included in CEC and CEU applications and to have materials printed in the conference program.
- **Complementary double (8'x16') booth space** - $1100 value - in a location of your choosing (first come, first served). Corporate sponsors will be assigned booths before other sponsors and vendors if contract is returned by September 1st.
- **Four attendee registrations** - $720 value - Use them for your employees or give them to your customers!
- **Outside booth space** - $250 value - 50' x 100' space in the parking lot between the museum and conference center.
- **Advertising** - Full-page color ad in the conference program, 1/4 page ad in three issues of the CCTA Journal, Complimentary insert in attendee bags, and a 5-minute ad running during registration!

Contact Becky Ravenkamp by email, Coordinator@HighPlainsNoTill.com, or phone 719-740-0715, if you want more information on the corporate sponsorship offer or to reserve your spot.

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Silver Booth Sponsor $1000
- Black and White 1/4 Page (3x5 inch portrait) Ad in Conference Program
- Complimentary 8'x8' Booth with Two Complimentary Registrations
- Business Card size Ad in Winter Issue of CCTA Journal
- Listed (Name, phone, address, link) on website, sponsor page and vendor page
- Complimentary Insert in Attendee Packet (550 copies delivered by Jan.1)

Gold Booth Sponsor $2000
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- Complimentary Insert in Attendee Packet (550 copies delivered by Jan.1)

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- Black and White 1/4 page ad in 3 Issues of CCTA Journal
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2016 Breakout Sessions

CCTA strives to provide educational opportunities that meet the needs of the members. We use information from event evaluations and feedback from members in selecting the next event's content. Evaluations were generally positive. We had requests for more farmer panels, and speakers on crop rotations, grazing cropland, weed management and economics of soil health / cover crops.

Balancing the needs of an association as large and diverse as CCTA is no easy task. The board of directors want to offer information for beginners as well as advanced topics for experiences no-tillers. Irrigated no-till has not been talked about much but is viewed as an area for growth.

With these challenges in mind we are excited to offer focus tracts for the 2016 High Plains No-Till Conference. The tracts will contain speakers for similar topics allowing attendees to focus their time in one room and one learning area or pick and choose from all breakout sessions to meet their individual needs.

The topics of the focus tracts will be: general no-till, ag technology, farm business, soil health and irrigated no-till. You can count on each topic to have the same high caliber speakers and information you have come to expect at the High Plains No-Till Conference. CCTA will bring you relevant speakers for the semi-arid region, and producer panels for each tract so you can hear from those who are implementing the ideas in the High Plains.

- General no-till topics will include: no-till introduction, equipment considerations, Wheat Stem Sawfly concerns, and a weed management panel.

- Irrigated no-till will feature Rudy Garcia, NM NRCS specialist working though irrigation challenges in our semi-arid environment, residue management, decreasing water demands with no-till management and producer panel on economics of irrigated no-till.

- Farm Business will feature Joshua Dukart helping you approach your holistic planning, thinking like a business, surviving low commodity prices, and equipment leasing.

- Ag Technology will explore cutting edge innovations in agriculture including new information on drones, economically optimal level of control on sprayers and planters, using your data to increase profits, and you can learn from producers who are using these new technologies.

- The Soil Health tract will include Dwayne Beck talking about no-till through the years, producers explaining exciting rotations that are being implemented with success in our semi-arid environment, innovative cropping systems and producer panel on making soil health profitable.

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Cover Crop and Soil Health Gaining Traction?

Lynn Monroe

Here on the High Plains the drought is not as bad as it has been in the previous few years. In fact, some areas have seen above annual precipitation amounts year-to-date. Even with a normal precipitation year, the drought is not far from the minds for farmers. Surviving D3 and D4 droughts is not an easy thing to do and effects of the drought are still evident in financial standings of many farms. Even though the High Plains has seen drought relief, California is now at the epicenter. Recently in the news there have been many articles on drought and water rights fights, new agriculture technology, and innovative crop rotations, including cover crops. It has come to mind that these topics are all interrelated but few are making the connection.

I've had the opportunity to attend several conferences and workshops the past few years. Many of these events had information on cover crops, good and bad. At one conference I heard some grumbling about how cover crops were not applicable in the limited rainfall area of western Kansas and the farmer was tired of hearing about them. Yet, at the same event, a young farmer from Colorado told me he expected grazing cover crops to be a major part his farm management plan. Cover crops and soil health seem to have a polarizing effect on some, and I had to question why.

Dr. Kristine Nichols, soil health keynote speaker at the High Plains No-Till Conference in February told the audience of over 400 farmers and industry personnel that she could not give them the exact recipe for soil health, they had to figure it out on their own. She went on to explain the benefits of working with the soil ecosystem rather than against it, giving examples of how others have done so. The principles of soil health are said to be universal, the techniques will be farm specific. So how are farmers supposed to know what specific techniques work in their area? Agriculture research seems to be the logical place to start, but that information is very conflicted.

At the No-Till on the Plains Winter Conference RMA, FSA and NRCS held a session explaining their policy on

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cover crops, continuous cropping and intercropping. The information in that session seemed to be confusing and hard to make sense of. RMA stated they use NRCS information to drive their policy, but those two agencies have very different policies. As one producer put it, “NRCS pays us to use cover crops and RMA punishes us for using them.” RMA has made changes to the policy at least three times in the last two years. Sometimes leaving farmers without coverage, even when farmers were following the most current RMA rules for cover crops during planting and termination.

When a new technology or cropping innovation is presented and the risk cannot be clearly quantified, it can lead to strong reactions on both sides of the issue. Claims that increased organic matter in the soil system can mitigate drought, increase porosity, and ultimately lead to more water available to cash crops has been a popular battle cry for cover crop supporters. At the same time cover crops opposition has claimed that cover crops use too much water to benefit semi-arid regions. When looking at the complexity of soil health and the interactions in the ecosystem there are too many variables to recreate trials exactly. With no conclusive evidence the choice to believe in these new ideas is up to the individual.

A new report by the National Working Group on Cover Crops and Soil Health may be able to help navigate the murky waters of cover crops and soil health. The group was formed in 2014 after a meeting of 300 industry and government leaders, farmers, researchers, educators and NGO representatives met. The working group has made recommendations from the meeting and refined them into action steps that it released in June 2015.

The summary of proposed action items include: 1. Offer a new request for applications within NIFA’s existing AFRI funding to support eight multi-state projects on cover crops and soil health, each funded at about $2.5 million. 2. Develop a strong public-private partnership to provide improved cover crop cultivars. 3. Further integrate cover crops and soil health into targeted intramural research programs within ARS, including the Long Term Agroecosystem Research (LTAR) trials that have recently been established. 4. Support establishment of a National Consortium on Cover Crops and Soil Health, to be funded by a mix of private foundation support and USDA Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research. 5. Collect and report on cover crop acreage annually through the Farm Service Agency as part of their annual crop data reporting effort. 6. Decouple crop insurance eligibility from cover crop management practices, in keeping with the way other crop management practices are handled. 7. Incentivize the use of cover crops through the federal crop program. 8. Seek strategic opportunities to further support cover crops within existing NRCS programs, including efforts to positively adjust ranking factors for cover crops in EQIP, and exploration of opportunities to integrate cover crops with buffer strips and no-till for land coming out of CRP. 9. For landowners taking ground out of CRP, offer an incentive payment to implement a set of conservation practices on that land which minimizes erosion and protects water quality. 10. In relevant programs and agencies at USDA, give attention to the particular needs of moisture-limited farming and ranching areas pertaining to improved soil health.

If these action steps can be completed there would be more information available to farmers and agronomists when evaluating new management practices. Will we see the benefits of cover crops and soil health in the dry years of drought, will they be a home run in average or above average years? Only time will tell; if there is research and funding available.

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CCTA is a non-profit organization serving all the States in the High Plains Region. It is a resource of experienced farmers working with industry, University and agricultural agency personnel whose goal is to spread research and on-farm gained information about conservation farming practices.