

Natural Resources Conservation Service

CONSERVATION Showcase

McCunn Continues Family's No-till Tradition

by Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist

Thirty-five years after starring in a video documenting his transition to no-till farming, the late Deane McCunn would be very proud of his grandson. Jason McCunn of rural Red Oak is continuing what his grandpa started by keeping his farm equipment above ground and leaving the soil undisturbed on the family's Montgomery County farm.

Jason says he wasn't aware, until recently, that his grandpa and great uncle Lyle worked with USDA's Soil Conservation Service (now called the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS) to develop the 15-minute video.



Talking conservation, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Andrew Focht (left) in the Red Oak office meets with McCunn to talk about his conservation plan.

Jason even continues to use the same tractor, a John Deere 4000, the McCunn brothers used in the video.



Jason McCunn of Red Oak.

"I remember my dad (Mike) telling me they were two of the first farmers in the area to implement no-till," said Jason. "I never realized it was that big of a deal until the local NRCS office made me aware of the video."

In 1982, Lyle passed away suddenly, leaving Deane to farm with his sons Mike and Mark. The three farmed together until 1993, when they began leasing the farm to neighbors. But in 2007, Jason returned to farm the family's land after serving several years in the United States Air Force.

"I decided a long time ago that I was going to come back here to farm," he said. "I'm proud to say this farm has been no-tilled since the video came out in 1980."

No-till Benefits

Jason says continuing the family's no-till legacy is important. He says many of the reasons to no-till today are the same as they were 35 years ago. "Especially when there's a 6- to 7-inch rain," he said. "If you drive around the area, the tilled fields have ditches full of soil. You're losing a lot of soil and nutrients when that happens."

Along with the erosion control benefits, Jason says no-till continues to be a cost savings measure. "With fewer passes through the field, I am saving money on fuel," he said. "I'm also conserving moisture by not disking it up and drying out the top soil layer."

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Jason is also realizing how no-till improves soil health. He can tell by the way the microorganisms in the soil feed off the crop residue. "I'm not disturbing the microorganisms in the soil," he said. "I know I've got them working, since the cornstalks are usually eaten away by the next crop year."

Complementing No-till

Jason stresses that his hilly ground needs more than just no-till to keep the soil from washing off the field. His more than 300 acres are also protected from erosion with terraces, grassed waterways, field borders, contour buffer strips, and even a riparian forest buffer.

With a small cow-calf operation, he says keeping the conservation practices well-maintained is critical. "I include alfalfa in my rotation, but I'm finding that wider headlands (field borders) and waterways benefit me because I can feed that to my animals, too."

Jason says he recalls his grandpa and great uncle growing alfalfa on about half of their crop acres. "My grandpa never had cattle, so along with generating a little bit of money, the crop rotation also helped improve the soil," he said. "Each year I gain a little more alfalfa ground, so I guess I'm coming back around."

Jason has a wife and three children – a son and two daughters. He says he's unsure if the farming itch will be passed on to another generation. "My son is starting to help me out more on the farm," he said. "I would like all of the kids to go to college and earn a degree. If, after that, they want to come back and farm hopefully they will have that opportunity."

And if they do, you can bet they will be no-tilling.

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Jason McCunn maintains practices like grassed waterways, field borders and buffers to help reduce soil erosion and for supplemental livestock feed.