



No-Till/Soil Health Program at work in Clearwater County

December 2016 Snapshots

Lakes, streams, and wetlands are nestled amongst a landscape dominated by pasture and hay ground throughout much of Clearwater County. Since production near these areas is critical to the local economy, the Clearwater Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) has been working to develop a no-till/soil health program to protect water quality in these sensitive areas.



12' Ranchworx aerator

Early in the summer of 2015, after receiving funding from the Clean Water Fund, the Clearwater SWCD began to build its program by purchasing a ten foot Great Plains no-till drill. The staff immediately got to work familiarizing themselves with the drill and worked with landowners to establish a number of demonstration plantings around the county.

The SWCD Board members and demonstration plantings generated considerable interest in the program, as seen in the strong attendance of local producers at the first no-till/soil health workshop late in the fall of 2015. This workshop allowed a variety of landowners to hear from the experience of local government experts and producers alike about the benefits of no-till to their operation and water quality.

In 2016, the no-till program was kicked off with another workshop featuring Kent Solberg of the Sustainable Farming Association, who highlighted the benefits of soil health for production and water quality. A no-till incentive program was also initiated at this event. This incentive program provides a per acre reimbursement to landowners who commit to using no-till practices for three years on priority acres. The incentive program helped to bolster usage of the no-till drill and gave producers the opportunity to experience no-till practices with reduced financial risk. During this first full season, 458 acres were run using the drill. Adding to the line-up of equipment with reduced soil impacts, the Clearwater SWCD acquired a pasture aerator as another tool for producers to use as part of their soil building practices.

With on-going outreach and education the Clearwater SWCD continues to build community awareness about the no-till soil/health program. The Clearwater SWCD has a workshop scheduled for December where a local producer will present his experience with a site that was established this past summer with no-till techniques. SWCD staff documented the growth of this site throughout the summer with a series of photos that help tell the no-till success story.

The promotion of the no-till/soil health program will continue on into 2017 and beyond. Workshops and field days will be planned to highlight successes and lessons learned. Additional expansion of the program is expected in 2017 with the addition of SWCD staff or contractors that will be able to perform custom seeding and aeration at a subsidized rate. The goal of this will be to make these tools more readily available to a greater number of producers throughout the county and increase hayland and pasture

production. Water quality will be improved through better infiltration, reduced run-off and erosion, improved buffers and soil health.