



Roger Fischer - Hollister, Oklahoma

HOLLISTER, Ok. -- "Well, I've got to go plow," are words heard less and less among farmers in the Rolling Plains of North Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas.

What was once the mark of a good farmer, clean fields without a trace of weeds, is being replaced by such practices as minimum tillage, no-tillage and crop residue management.

"Agronomists will tell you no-till offers such advantages as better water retention in the field's soil that will last longer to water crop plants as well as helping the farmer make fewer trips across the field saving in fuel and oil costs, machinery use and better time management."



But no-till means a lot of things to different farmers, Roger Fischer, Hollister, Ok., a dryland cotton farmer, says no-till allows him something even better, the ability to better manage his cotton crop.

"There was a time when no-till and conventional tillage was an economical wash for me," Fischer said. "When diesel fuel was 60 cents a gallon and Roundup herbicide was \$38 a gallon, no-till was relatively expensive for me."

Times have changed in regard to the cost of diesel fuel, he points out. In 2000, he committed himself to change to no-till. He bought an air drill to plant wheat and modified his cotton planter.

"When I and some other farmers around here started experimenting with no-till, we were thought of as 'somewhat eccentric', he said.

Fischer farms a rotation of wheat and cotton in a 20 mile area around Hollister. He farms a lot of different types of soil, but a lot of it has sand. In 1998 and 1999, he lost a lot of his cotton crop to blowing sand. He experimented with no-till, planting cotton in wheat stubble. "I found the young cotton plants were better protected by the wheat stubble and other plant residue left on the ground."

With the exception of some light plowing to smooth out old ruts, Fischer has stayed with no-till since 2000, "2006 will be my sixth cotton crop planted in wheat stubble, using Roundup to control weeds," he said.

Fischer has found these herbicides break down quickly in the soil after killing weeds. Control of the boll weevil by the successful boll weevil eradication program now allows farmers to use less insecticide, he said.

The major benefit of no-till for Fischer, however, is in the management of his cotton crop while it is growing.

"Boll retention is the best thing no-till has done for my cotton farming," he said. "When the weather turns dry during the cotton growing season, my cotton will hold onto its bolls longer because the ground, covered with residue, holds its moisture better. The cotton plants will not shed their bolls as quickly in dry weather and hold on longer for another rain."

Fischer even plants picker cotton varieties now. Once thought to be limited to irrigated farming or to wetter climates, picker cotton offers the advantages of higher yields and better grading cotton. Picker varieties, he says, will respond better to moisture retention and fertility.

Fischer uses cotton strippers to harvest the cotton. Using no-till for the last five years in dryland cotton farming, Fischer has had an average yield of 522 pounds of cotton lint per acre. Some of the cotton he planted June 23, 2005, yielded a bale to the acre, he says.

Working with his cotton scout, Jerry Stoll, Fischer was able to manage his late cotton with growth regulators and speed up its maturity some, he says.

The winter drought of 2005-06 has been a wake-up call, however, reducing Fischer's wheat crop to only 400 acres he will be able to harvest. Since the majority of his wheat didn't mature, Fischer says he will be planting more cotton than ever this year.

Recent localized rains in the area are encouraging to Fischer and other no-till farmers planning their spring cotton planting.



