

# MISSOURI CONSERVATION SHOWCASE

## Missouri Farmer Has No Debate With Conservation Programs

**N**orthwestern Missouri farmer John Hickman has been debating the benefits of no-till farming with his friends and neighbors for years. He's found that convincing conventional tillers to switch to no-till can be a difficult task. But once in awhile, nature dumps a load of evidence that is hard to deny.



*NRCS Resource Conservationist Ted Utz, left, NRCS District Conservationist, Rodney Saunders, center, and Andrew County farmer, John Hickman, check the progress of Hickman's corn crop on a no-till field.*

In May, after more than seven inches of rain fell in 24 hours, Hickman surveyed his fields to see what damage the storm had caused. The next thing he did was call the Andrew County office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to thank the staff for their encouragement and assistance in establishing conservation practices.

“I was very proud,” Hickman says. “I had a few places where water ran over terraces, but I didn't have any damage like I saw on farms down the road from me where they are not no-tilling.”

Hickman, 63, has always been a farmer, including the past 36 years in Andrew County. In the mid 1980s, he started building waterways, terraces, filter strips and diversions to slow soil erosion.

“I was on the Andrew County Soil and Water Conservation District board (for 14 years) and we always talked about conservation programs. The more we talked about things, the more interested I got in trying them,” he says.

In 1985, Hickman decided to try no-till.

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“It took me about 10 years to be convinced to try it everywhere, but now I no-till everything.” Hickman says. He grows about 1,200 acres of corn and soybeans. He says no-till reduces his time and costs associated with growing crops and maintaining conservation practices, and often improves yields.



*NRCS Resource Conservationist, Ted Utz, left, and John Hickman review the conservation plan for one of Hickman's farms in Andrew County.*

“My yields are just as good as the yields people get who use conventional tillage, and in dry years mine are quite a bit better,” he says.

To help him install conservation practices and make the switch to no-till, Hickman has taken advantage of federal and state cost-share programs. He is not just a no-tiller, however, and if there is a program available, Hickman is willing to try it. He has had land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program since 1987, and has been utilizing the Environmental Quality Incentives Program since 2004. He now has more than a dozen EQIP contracts on about 1,000 acres. The contracts help Hickman pay for grid sam-

pling, crop scouting, diversions, pest management, nutrient management and yield mapping.

“John is just a leader,” says NRCS District Conservationist Rodney Saunders. “He’s not afraid to try new things.”

NRCS Resource Conservationist Ted Utz, who has worked in Andrew County since 1980, says he has seen many instances of that.

“When he started to get into the grid soil sampling, he got the equipment and worked with someone in the business. They sampled his fields together. He just jumped right in and figured it out,” Utz says. “Not many farmers his age would tear into the technology like he has.”

Utz says that Hickman has been just as passionate about promoting conservation as he has been about implementing it. For example, as president of the Andrew County SWCD board, Hickman led the way for the district to obtain one of the first two grants available from the Missouri Department of Conservation to purchase a no-till drill for loan to farmers in the county.

“The reason I’ve been doing it is because of these two right here,” Hickman says while pointing at Utz and Saunders. “They kept telling me that I ought to try this and try that, and I did. And it really works.

“It’s important, too. We’ve got to save our soil or our next generation won’t have anything.”



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Hickman says he recently returned from Germany where he was part of a group that met with farmers there. He was surprised to discover a nearly non-existent conservation program in Germany.

Some of the German farmers will soon know more about conservation, though, because they have accepted the group's offer to come to Missouri and see how conservation can be utilized.

Hickman says the conservation programs in the United States are extremely helpful, adding that he doesn't know why even more farmers don't take advantage of them.

"EQIP money has paid for a lot of what I've done. I figure if NRCS is paying the bill, why not try it," he says. "I've utilized all of the conservation programs, and I'm thankful that we have them."

In recognition of Hickman's efforts, the Andrew County Soil and Water Conservation District awarded him its prestigious "Master Conservationist Award" in April 2007.

Hickman says the appreciation goes both ways.

"I've gotten some awfully good assistance from NRCS and the district," he says. "People have helped me with whatever I needed."

Fortunately, after many years of utilizing conservation practices and programs, not even a seven-inch rain created a need for damage repair assistance on Hickman's land.

*Written by Charlie Rahm  
NRCS, September 2007*

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*Ted Utz, left, John Hickman, center, and  
Rodney Saunders in one of Hickman's  
terraced, no-tilled soybean fields.*

