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Farmers tackle conservation challenge

Program requires 30 percent of crop residue left in the field before planting

Cecilia Parsons
 Capital Press

Farm manager Seth Rossow is one of the first California farmers to take 'the challenge.'

He signed up 120 acres of grain corn ground for the Best Management Practices Challenge offered by American Farmland Trust and Sustainable Conservation.

This spring, instead of chiseling, disking and listing the field, he strip tilled behind his winter wheat crop and planted corn.

"I expect to take a hit in production, but I want to get the soil in better shape," said Rossow who manages the ground for Bert Wilgenburg's Flint Dairy just south of Merced.

Rossow is taking advantage of a reimbursement offer for crop and revenue loss to justify the experiment, but he expects considerable dividends in the long run.

"I wanted to get the ground in better shape. It is low in organic matter and we think strip till will improve it over time, add organic matter," said Rossow. Along the way, he said, he would cut down on soil moisture loss by not disking.

Strip till is one of the conservation practices encouraged in the BMP Challenge that is hoped to reduce carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus in the environment.

Alex Karolyi, of Sustainable Conservation, said reducing tillage will help reduce air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley, which is high on a list for poor air quality.

Conservation tillage methods eliminate multiple passes through farm fields by planting into the previous crop's residue. In Rossow's case the only tillage is a strip where the seeds are planted. The challenge requires that 30 percent of the residue is left in the field before planting. The nutrient management component of the challenge is aimed at reducing fertilizer run-off and improving water quality by balancing application with crop uptake.

Karolyi said besides reductions of dust and diesel emissions from machinery, there are savings in fuel, maintenance and labor with conservation tillage.

Farmers are reluctant to try something that may cause them to lose production, said Karolyi. Rossow said the reimbursement justifies taking the risk of losing production.

This is the first year the BMP Challenge has been in California. Since 1998, more than 50 farmers in Idaho and several Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states have enrolled 9,200 acres in the program, which is coordinated here by Sustainable Conservation and American Farmland Trust.

In California, any Central Valley farmer growing corn crops is eligible to enroll in the reduced tillage program. The BMP Challenge for nutrient management was originally only available to farmers in San Joaquin, Merced and Stanislaus counties, but now farmers in other counties are eligible.

Ladi Asgill, Sustainable Conservation's project manager in Modesto, said as of June 26, there are 600 acres enrolled in the tillage challenge. The goal is 1,000 acres, and Asgill said they expect to reach that in the next crop rotation. In the San Joaquin Valley, he said there are between 60,000 to 70,000 acres under conservation tillage.

The idea behind the challenge, Asgill explained, is to get farmers to try conservation tillage more than once.

"Quite a few try it and after a few yield hits they quit rather than lose more income. We're hoping they'll hang in there longer and work out the bugs," said Asgill.

At harvest, he said, they will compare yields with similar fields under conventional tillage and pay for differences based on crop insurance rates.

"We're hoping yields will be comparable, but plan for the worst. Our aim is to allow them time to learn how to farm with conservation tillage," said Asgill.

The nutrient management program aims at improving water quality by reducing run-off from fertilized fields. One big plus for farmers is compliance with waste discharge requirements. Joe Choperena of Sustainable Conservation said besides the monetary incentives to take the challenge, farmers will find themselves on the right side of the state water board by not exceeding fertilizer application rates.

The water board requires that only 1.4 times the amount of fertilizer used by the crop can be applied. In the challenge, farmers will use a computer model called Nitrogen Optimizer. Using data, including information from previous applications, crops grown and soil type, the program gives the level of nutrients already in the field and charts out what nutrient requirements will be for the current crop.

"If yields do drop because of reduced applications, the program pays the difference," said Choperena.

Choperena said University of California farm advisors in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties have been talking with farmers and dairy producers about the program and several are expected to sign on.

Funding for BMP Challenge comes from a USDA Conservation Innovation grant through AgFlex, a risk management company and American Farmland Trust.



Farm manager Seth Rossow in a 40-acre strip tilled cornfield, south of Merced. The plot is a test site growing alongside another cornfield grown traditionally. - John Tipton for the Capital Press

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