

Experts tout conservation tillage

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Colusa Farm Show workshops focus on management practices, more

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COLUSA, Calif. -- As production costs keep rising, conservation tillage methods can save growers money as well as help their soil, experts said during a seminar here.

A system of cover crops and limited- or no-till land management can cut a farmer's fuel costs and perhaps the need for some expensive equipment, said Gene Miyao, a University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisor.

Tomato grower Darrin Williams' T&P Farms in Arbuckle, Calif., started using conservation tillage methods after installing variable drip irrigation in the mid-1990s. He has seen some significant savings, though it took him a few years to figure out what he was doing, he said.

"We were not well equipped" in the beginning, Williams said during the opening seminar Feb. 1 at the Colusa Farm Show. "We were trying to do something new with the equipment that we had been using."

The seminar was one of more than a half-dozen presentations during the three-day farm show Feb. 1-3, where more than 260 exhibitors large and small peddled their equipment and products. Some 40,000 people were expected to attend the event at the Colusa fairgrounds.

"The weather's nice and we're looking forward to bringing people out," David Cover of the Tuolumne City, Calif.-based Heatmor Outdoor Wood Furnaces said on Tuesday morning. "This is a great show. ... I'm thrilled it's dry and there's no fog."

Other workshops during the 46th annual farm show dealt with farming for wildlife, lubrication of farm equipment, farm and ranch estate planning and other topics.

Conservation tillage is a management practice in which at least 30 percent of the soil surface is covered with plant residue, primarily to reduce water runoff. The practice -- done more in the Midwest than in California -- reduces the volume of the soil that is disturbed, according to a paper on tillage methods by UC-Davis expert Jeff Mitchell.

Williams' farm has used wheat, mixed forage, triticale and other coverings for his fields, which has reduced runoff and improved the health of his fields. He used to have "tired fields" that were prone to root disease, but

conservation tillage "seemed to put a little life back into them," he said.

Management decisions must be thought out carefully, he said.

"If you're going to grow a cover crop, you've got to think about it," Williams said. "You've got to have a crop to fit a specific purpose ... and make sure it fits into a budget."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers programs to help growers offset initial losses from switching from conventional tillage, said Ladi Asgill of the natural resources advocacy group Sustainable Conservation.

"Pretty much it's a money-back guarantee," he said.

Online

UC-Davis Sustainable Agriculture Farming Systems Project: <http://safs.ucdavis.edu/>

Sustainable Conservation: <http://www.suscon.org/>