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Tillage Equipment Rental Program Boosts Profits, Soil Health in San Joaquin Valley

By Cecilia Parsons on behalf of Sustainable Conservation

The inaugural year of a conservation tillage equipment rental program started off in high gear.

Dairy producers and other forage crop growers are taking advantage of a program that allows them to get their feet wet in conservation tillage and determine if the practice will fit into their operations.

Conservation tillage is minimal disturbance of soil between harvest of one crop and planting of the next crop. The practice is much more common in the Midwest, but California growers, led by dairy producers double cropping forage crops, are rapidly adding conservation tillage acres.



In order to introduce more growers to conservation tillage, Sustainable Conservation and California Ag Solutions collaborated on an equipment rental program that provides not only delivery and specialized tillage and planting tools, but agronomic support and advice. Sustainable Conservation's program representative, Ladi Asgill, said conservation tillage reduces the number of passes per field and allows growers to

plant more acres in a smaller time frame using fewer implements and drivers. Earlier planting of corn silage can mean extra winter soil moisture for seedlings, Asgill said. Growers who have ground in conservation tillage for several years report the added advantages of improved soil tilth and water holding capacity.

Strip tilling a recently harvested winter forage field in preparation for silage corn planting. Hanford, CA

Due to the specialization of conservation tillage equipment, implements like strip tillers, finishers and precision planters are rarely available for rental. Growers who want to see how the equipment works in their operations can now sign up for the rental program and try conservation tillage before making a decision to purchase their own equipment.

Rental costs per acre are \$20 for strip tilling, \$10 an acre for strip finishing, \$5 an acre for border maker and \$18 an acre for planter.

Two Orthman 1 tRIPr strip tillers and a John Deere 1700 planter with specialized attachments have been on the road for the past month, delivered to farmers for conservation tillage and precision planting. The strip tillers prep the ground by working eight-inch wide strips of ground prior to planting. Using a GPS system on the tractor, the planter's precision capabilities place the seed at the correct depth and spacing in the strips.

Demand for the equipment has been higher than expected in this first year, limiting equipment availability to the northern San Joaquin Valley. Asgill said the partnership is considering adding more equipment and technical support to expand to Tulare and Kings counties.

Mikel Winemiller, customer account manager for California Ag Solutions and project field leader, provides support for growers who are making their first attempt with conservation tillage.

“We want to get them started right. With 10 years’ experience in conservation tillage we know what they need to do to succeed. The grower supplies the horsepower and operator and we are here to take them through the process.”

Winemiller said they expect to see about 1,000 acres strip tilled and planted this season for 12 producers. The plan isn't to strip till all of the producers' forage crop acres, but to show them how the process works on one of their fields.

The grower is responsible for prepping the field – a process that begins after the summer crop is harvested in the fall.

“The big thing is to get the check spacing right and to match the borders with the equipment,” Winemiller said.



A tour last summer of conservation tillage programs drew a number of interested growers. Sponsored by Sustainable Conservation, the tour highlighted growers who successfully transitioned their forage crop ground to conservation tillage and either customized tillage tools to fit their operations or purchased the tools. Winemiller said growers on the tour who are participating in the rental program “paid attention and set up their fields right for CT to work.” Preparation plus the opportunity to learn about equipment needs and timing of field work without the initial investment in equipment gives growers the opportunity to see if conservation tillage is right for them, he added.

Application of “pop up” fertilizer and planting of silage corn in strip-tilled rows on the same day using GPS technology. Hanford, CA.

Variations in soil types, irrigation practices and forage varieties determine what growers need to do to be successful with conservation tillage.

For instance, achieving a consistent stand and maximum tonnage with corn silage is easier in sandy loam than in heavier ground. Growers can make adjustments on their tool bars, adding implements to break up clods and smooth the seedbed if needed.

Helping growers be successful with conservation tillage crops will lead to more ground conversion, Winemiller believes. Once growers see the benefits – both in labor and fuel savings – they will be more likely to invest in their own equipment.

Probing the soil in a field being planted to corn silage, Winemiller picked up a handful of soil and noted that the long-term benefits are in his hand.

“The organic matter, the moisture holding capacity all encourages better root growth, which means less stress on the corn plants. The crop residue on the ground shades the soil and keeps the temperatures cooler, giving the corn a better start.”

To reserve equipment, contact Winemiller at 209-626-6440 or mike@calagsolutions.com.