

Wabasha County Farmer Profile, Part 2 of a series of 6: Robert (Bob) & Roger Walkes

Interview conducted and transcribed by Melendy Miller

Soil health is all the buzz in the ag world. The Wabasha Soil and Water Conservation District and the Izaak Walton League of America, Wapashaw Chapter (Ikes) have partnered on a project to learn what progressive farmers in Wabasha County are doing to improve soil health. With funding provide by the Ikes' Upper Mississippi River Initiative, we have been conducting interviews with 30 farmers from throughout Wabasha County.

The second family that is being highlighted for their efforts to improve soil health is the Walkes brothers of Plainview. Bob and Roger Walkes have been farming their whole lives. They grew up on their family dairy farm. They both have their own farms now, but they got their start at farming at very young ages. Roger remembers his dad having him hook up the milk hoses in the barn when he was eight or nine. Roger milked cows up until 2005. Now, he raises feeder steers and some beef cows. Bob has a beef cow-calf and feedlot operation. Both Roger and Bob are growing corn and beans on their farmland along with some cover crops. They've been utilizing cover crops on and off for about 12 years. It can be hard for farmers to get their cover crops in when the fall weather is too cold or too wet. Conditions are everything for ensuring cover crops get planted and have good growth in the fall. Roger and Bob agree that having even a small amount of growth on the cover crop makes a positive impact on the health of the soil.

What is uncommon about Bob and Roger's farming operations is that they have been utilizing no till farming practices. No till farming is a way to farm the land without disturbing the soil. Some of the benefits of no tilling are increased water retention, increased organic matter, increased biodiversity of the soil, and decreased erosion. Bob made the switch to no till in 2005.

“Going no till was an easy choice because there is a lot less investment in machinery and time out in the field. I think it is most farmers goals to leave the land in better shape than they got it. It just seems like taking care of the land and soil is the right thing to do, and I’ve been trying to do that since I started farming.” Roger made the switch to no till not long after his brother. His brother was the biggest influence on him switching to no till. “I actually started doing no till because my brother did it. I kind of chuckled and thought we’ll see how this works, but his crops ended up looking pretty good, so I gave it a shot.” Both Roger and Bob said that it was a gradual transition for them to switch to no till. Bob started by planting soybeans into corn stalks and eventually worked up to having the whole farm into no till. “I’ve always planted my soybeans into my cornstalks using no till, and that worked really well. Finally, I got kind of gutsy and tried a little corn on the beans. It ended up being the easiest transition. In time we tried corn into the corn stalks, and that worked too.” Roger said that when he first started utilizing no till, he did just a little bit more no till every year. They have seen the benefits of no till, and they both agree they wouldn’t go back to using tillage. “I wouldn’t spend any time from my day out there doing tillage. I don’t believe in tillage anymore and I wish there were more people that saw the benefits of not tilling. It doesn’t only improve the soil; it also saves a lot of money and time,” stated Roger.

They have seen the results of their efforts on their soil tests and yield maps. Roger and Bob soil test their land every four years. Bob has most of his fields pushing 4% organic matter, but he still wants to see improvement after every soil test. Roger is happy with his soil test results, but he is also always looking to improve his soil profile. While no till is great for soil health, it is also economical. Farmers, like Roger and Bob, that have switched to no till are spending less time in the field, spending less money on fuel, and over time have been able to decrease their

inputs (e.g. fertilizer, herbicides) because their soil is able to provide what the plants need. They can reap all the benefits while still keeping their yields high.

Even though no till helps with water retention and reducing erosion, Roger and Bob still watch their fields very closely for erosion. Roger has been able to take out his waterways without issue since going no till, “I don’t have any waterways, but my soil absorbs the water. If I see it start to wash, then I’ll put them back, but for now those fields aren’t washing and that’s because my soil is healthy.” While Bob still has his waterways, he also says that his fields absorb water really well. They are both very happy with how their soil is working for them. They are both looking to continue reducing their nutrient inputs.

The Walkes brothers have been participating in nitrogen trials with the University of Minnesota for a few years now. They have been fascinated with the results so far. They have both been able to cut back on their nitrogen use because of the trials. Switching to no till worked really well for the Walkes brothers. Making big farming transitions can be daunting and the results might not be evident right away. Bob noted, “The reason I think people are hesitant to try no till is because it takes patience.” The Walkes brothers made the leap to no till, and they are satisfied with the success they have had on their farms.

To learn more about soil health, activities relating to this project and other conservation activities in Wabasha County please contact Jen Wahls, Ecological Technician with Wabasha SWCD by phone 651-560-2051, email jennifer.wahls@mn.nacdnet.net , Terri Peters, District Manager, phone 651-560-2044, email terri.peters@mn.nacdnet.net or stop in the office at 611 Broadway Ave, Ste 10 in Wabasha.