

26-Year-Old Farmer Builds Successful Operation with No-Till

By Dick Tremain

"Nate may only be 26-years-old, but he farms like a conservation veteran," says long-time Sioux County District Conservationist Greg Marek. Nate Ronsiek, a young Hawarden farmer, works with Marek, a USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employee, to address resource concerns on his land.

"Nate has been farming a short time, but he's doing a lot of things right on his farm that are saving him money and improving the environment. I wish more people would do what Nate does," says Marek, who has worked with Ronsiek since 2005.

Ronsiek says he learned many conservation practices from his late father, Vince, while growing up on his family's century farm and while earning an agriculture degree at Kansas State University.

Ronsiek says he counts on Marek and his NRCS staff for helping him understand federal and state programs, networking and keeping current on agricultural research. "If there is a way to do it, they know it," he said. "NRCS keeps me up-to-date with the latest in conservation techniques, practices and ways to save money. I make it a point to stop by the NRCS office when visiting my USDA Service Center."

Ronsiek raises 65 stock cows with his wife, Rachel, on 600 acres of land, including the family homestead where they now live.

"K-State taught me all about the benefits of no-till," said Ronsiek. "Kansas has warmer soils than Iowa, but soil temperatures at planting time in Sioux County have not been an issue. No-till works for me and I am enjoying the time savings and better soil health this conservation practice gives us."

Ronsiek says he's heard no-tilling into residue can be a problem for some farmers, but he hasn't seen it. He says his planter can handle heavy residue.

Because he farms no-till, Ronsiek says his fields can handle heavy rain much better than conventionally tilled fields. Ronsiek said, "We had a one-inch rain in 20 minutes last spring. I saw water sitting on top of the conventionally tilled field long after the rain stopped. In my no-till fields the water went straight down. The no-till infiltration rate is great. The increased no-till residue reduced soil erosion and made more soil moisture available for growing my crops in the weeks that followed."

Ronsiek says some university research shows there may be a yield drop in the first few years after switching to no-till. He said he wanted to see for himself if this was true. He conducted side-by-side comparisons of no-till and conventional till tests plots as an Iowa State Extension's On-Farm Research Program and an Iowa Learning Farm cooperator. Ronsiek says he didn't see a

difference. The no-till corn field came in this year at 200.7 bushels per acre while the conventional-tilled plot was 200.6 bushels per acre.

"I know no-till works on the hills—that is a no brainer for me. This test took place over three growing seasons on a five-acre piece of my better ground in the bottoms. There was virtually no yield difference between no-till and conventional tillage in the test plots. I'm excited because now I'm past the first three years of no-till. In future growing seasons yields are expected to increase—profit potential, too. What I don't spend on fuel and time for conventional tillage field trips I can invest elsewhere on the farm," said Ronsiek.

Saving money using a conservation practice that benefits others? Greg Marek says that's an excellent definition of a conservation veteran. He says that also is a definition which can be applied to Nate Ronsiek today, even as a younger man.

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Story: 606 words

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Barbara Stewart, Iowa NRCS state agronomists, suggests producers consult the following no-till resources:

- Iowa Learning Farm: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ILF/cooperators.html>
See Nate Ronsiek's and 27 other producer/cooperators' agronomic test data
- Iowa State University's "Considerations in Selecting No-Till" from December 2002:
www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1901D.pdf
- NRCS "Three Click" Energy Estimator for calculating no-till input savings:
<http://ecat.sc.egov.usda.gov/>
- Financial assistance for farmers converting to no-till may be available from NRCS. Stewart urges producers with questions to visit their local NRCS office.



Farmer Nate Ronsiek and NRCS District Conservationist Greg Marek check ground cover on a no-till corn field. Three years of data from Ronsiek's no-till fields show no yield drag compare to conventional tillage with higher production costs.



NRCS District Conservationist Greg Marek and Sioux County farmer Nate Ronsiek check a terrace between two of Ronsiek's no-till fields. Three years of data from Ronsiek's no-till fields show no yield drag compare to conventional tillage with higher production costs.