

New twist in tillage

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this procedure, he says, is that subsoil lacks the nutrients and water-holding capacity necessary for plant growth. So by bringing it to the surface, the topsoil in effect becomes diluted. For best results, topsoil belongs on top, and subsoil belongs on the bottom, Myer asserts.

"When you're mixing topsoil with subsoil, neither one can do the job it's supposed to do," he says. And with his corn yields averaging 160 to 185 bushels during the past five years, it's hard to argue with Myer's logic.

Although they may not be ready to hang their hats on Myer's tillage system, most experts who have seen the results aren't ready to argue, either.

"I think he has something that's worth looking at," says Albert Jarrett, Penn State's associate professor of agricultural engineering. Jarrett, who along with other scientists visited Myer's farm in March, was hard-pressed to refute the farmer's claims. "It was our opinion that there had been no evidence of runoff from any of those fields," he says, adding, however, that he had no way of knowing how much rain had actually fallen on the farm during the winter.

Jarrett, who notes that the

system is "not quite ridge tilling and not quite chisel plowing," has some theories about why slit tillage is apparently successful. "With slit tillage, we're actually taking the terracing concept and reducing the width of the terraces to about 30 inches," he says.

While these 30-inch "mini-terraces" help to contain the water, the sides of the slits are providing more surface area for infiltration. "What he is doing is enhancing the infiltration capacity of the soil, such that there is essentially no runoff—at least for storms of average magnitude," says Jarrett.

Just how much rainfall the slits can accommodate has yet to be determined, and studies getting underway this year may serve to answer that question. Jarrett notes that tests will be conducted on the Myer farm, as well as two nearby farms where moldboard and chisel plowing are practiced. Using these additional farms with similar soil types and terrain should provide a more valid comparison, he notes.

Jarrett cautions that the system's water holding capacity may not always be a plus. "You have to be very careful that the water that infiltrates doesn't take with it a high concentration of nitrogen," he says, noting that the slit tillage system will have to be accompanied by a conscientious nutrient management program to ensure groundwater quality.

The ag engineer was as impressed with Myer's soil texture the quality as he was with the tillage system itself. "I don't know that I've seen soil like that in a long, long time," he said. Growers who go to slit tillage could possibly note similar improvements in their topsoil after five to 10 years in the program, he estimated.

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