

Conservation Tillage Helps Improve Wildlife Habitat

LEESPORT — The practice of leaving the residue of the latest crop over winter is helping wildlife across Pennsylvania.

"Conservation tillage, of which crop residue covering the soil is an important part, is known for controlling soil erosion," said Robert Heidecker, state resource conservationist for the USDA Soil Conservation Service. "Research is showing that this practice also provides important wildlife benefits."

Heidecker added that fields planted by conservation tillage methods definitely do more for wildlife habitat than the large, clean fields used in many large farming operations in recent years.

Fencerows, windbreaks, brushy

draws, and odd area within and between fields have been cleared to enlarge farming operations. Farm wildlife populations have declined in these areas.

Conservation tillage, suggests Heidecker, may be one way to help increase wildlife numbers.

A two-year study in Illinois found 448 more birds per square mile in fields of standing cornstalks than in fall-plowed fields. According to the study, more waste grain is left in the untilled fields. The untilled acreage averaged 384 pounds of waste grain per acre while only 3.3 pounds per acre was left in the fall-plowed land.

A similar study in Iowa showed that ground nesting birds benefitted from conservation tillage. No-till fields revealed an

average of 37 bird nests per 247 acres compared to only four nests for the same acreage with plowing.

Heidecker defined the ways in which conservation tillage helps wildlife:

- It provides cover for some wildlife and makes waste grain available for many birds and animals.

- It reduces equipment travel, which means fewer nest disturbances and higher hatching rates. Surface tillage equipment such as plows and disks not only promote soil erosion and destroy nests, they also kill or injure flightless young and incubating adults.

- Adequate crop residue tends to disperse nest sites throughout the field.

A three-year field study by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and SCS supports this concept. The study on the effects of conservation tillage and cover crops on small birds and mammals found the largest numbers in no-tilled fields. Thirty-three different kinds of birds including bobwhite quail and ring-necked pheasants were found in the 21 fields in the study.

Heidecker adds that while conservation tillage is capable of improving wildlife habitat on cropland, it cannot replace the habitat provided by fencerows, brushy and weedy banks, and other odd and steep areas.

Most conservationists agree that conservation tillage is one of the easiest, cheapest, and most effective tools available to control soil erosion. The fact that it might also improve the farm's overall wildlife habitat is just one more reason, Heidecker says, that farmers should consider using conservation tillage.

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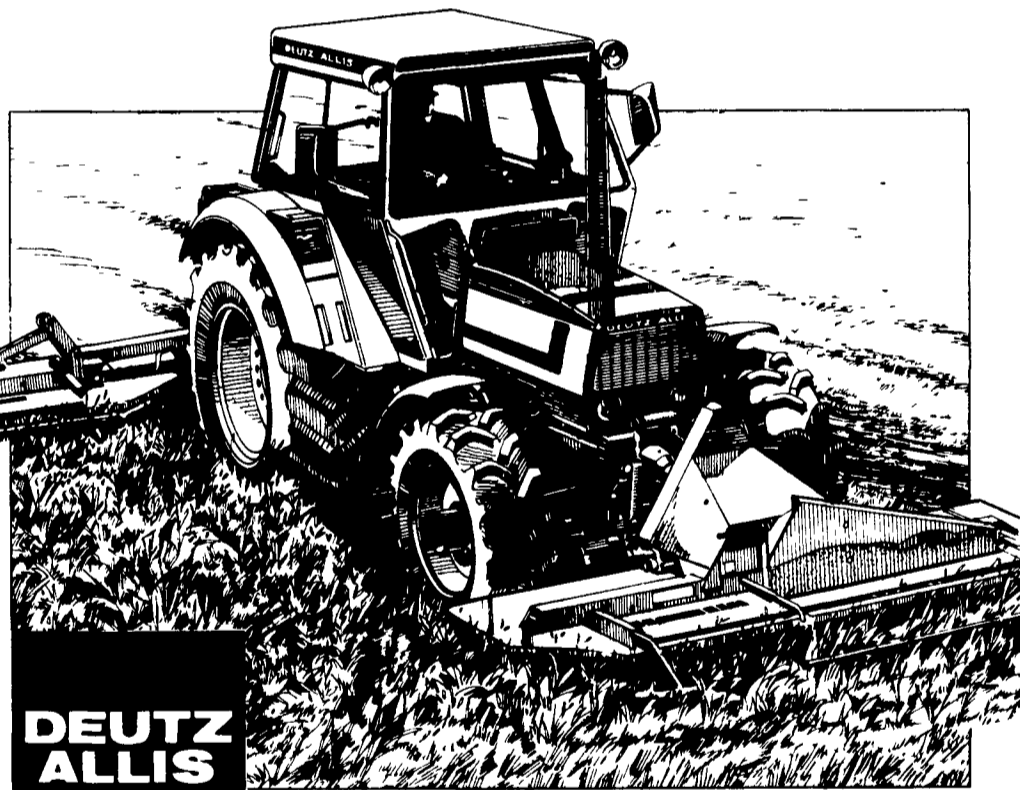
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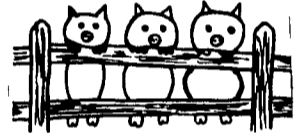


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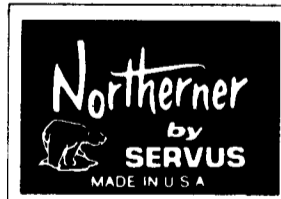
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