

No-till farming saves man's soil from wind and water erosion

By Andy Heintz

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Tony Horinek says he's always believed that farmers should be good stewards of the earth.

"The land doesn't belong to us," he said. "It belongs to God. We can only pass it on to the next generation."

Horinek has always practiced what he preaches with no-till farming, enrolling marginal acres in the Conservation Reserve Program, growing wildlife-friendly plants on land not suitable for crops and planting windbreaks on his three farmsteads in Thomas County.

Horinek's reserve land includes about 140 acres spread across five tracts. Trees and shrubs he has planted include American plum, fragrant sumac and chokecherries. He said the wildlife-friendly plantings have led to his family seeing deer and pheasant all the time. The family's windbreaks are mostly cedar with Austrian pine.

Many of the wildlife plantings required the family to water the plants and trees by hand. Horinek said other trees and plants were wa-

tered by using drip irrigation.

This year, he and his wife Anita are being recognized for their land preservation practices by the Kansas Bankers Association, which selected them as winners of this year's Soil Conservation award.

"We're surprised and honored to win the award," Horinek said.

He said no-till farming — where farmers spray weeds rather than constantly tilling the soil, and leave crop residue to prevent erosion — has helped him keep soil in place.

"The mulch keeps the wind from displacing the soil," Horinek said.

This keeps the dirt from blowing away and causing dust storms, he said. Dust storms can be dangerous when they engulf nearby highways and temporarily blind drivers. Collisions can cause property damage, even death.

No-till farming is not just good for safety reasons, though, he said; it's also good for farmers. Horinek said no-till farming has helped him conserve water, increase his yields, improve soil quality and stop soil loss due to wind erosion.

"It increases what you can grow by keeping more moisture in the ground," he said.

Water that is saved through no-till methods is important because northwest Kansas gets so little rain. Keeping the soil in place ensures the preservation of the land so it can be passed on to the next generation, Horinek said.

The award winners said they began farming in 1981 when they bought three quarter-sections of dryland farm ground. Before he became a farmer full-time, Horinek said, he worked for what was then the U.S. Soil Conservation Service — now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service — for 10 years.

While he was working for the agency, he said, he got to know people winning conservation awards and he respected what they were doing for the land.

The Horineks said they tried to use good conservation practices as soon as they started farming by incorporating terraces in their fields to catch runoff and planting trees on land that wasn't ideal for cultivation.

Today, Tony said, they operate a family farm where all of their immediate family members are involved in farm work. The family grows corn, sunflower seeds, milo and wheat. Their son Clint and his wife Sarah and their three

children live two miles east of Tony and Anita's house.

Clint and his family has been reaping the benefits from the a tree belt his parents planted 28 years ago. The trees have grown quite a bit since their early days, and they now shelter Clint and Sarah's home and play areas, Tony said. He said the tree belt also decreases the family's heating bills.

"It's fun to see the benefits of our work pay off," said Anita.

The Horineks say they are grateful to be able to farm for a living.

"We feel blessed to be farming," said Tony. "Not everyone can do this occupation."

Tony said their landlords — they rent about two-thirds of the ground they farm — have been great about cooperating with them in conservation efforts over the years.

The family said they wanted to thank the conservation district for all the help the agency has given them over the years.

"They have been great about identifying wildlife-friendly trees and shrubs, helping design windbreaks, lay out terraces, providing cost-share for the conservation projects and a whole array of support," Tony said.

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