

*Conservation Agriculture* —

*"Farm the best: alternatives for the rest"*

*Demonstration farm project of the Natural Resources Trust*



Conservation Agriculture  
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**CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE DEMONSTRATES BENEFITS  
OF AGRICULTURAL-ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING AND COOPERATION  
Project Set To Complete Five Years of Demonstrations**

**Devils Lake, N.D.** (July 6, 2005) – North Dakota farmers have long contended that they are the best stewards of our land and other natural resources. A five-year demonstration project initiated by the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust confirms that, with the right tools and support, they are.

The Trust released its final report on Conservation Agriculture today. The project, which will conclude in December 2005, has shown that when agriculture and conservation thrive together, farm profitability improves, natural resource conservation is enhanced, and society is the ultimate benefactor.

The results of the project are proof of the positives that occur when producers “farm the best and use alternatives on the rest,” according to Sharon Clancy, project coordinator.

“Conservation Agriculture was developed to show what can happen when farmers have incentives to work only their most productive soils while implementing conservation practices on lower quality acreage,” Clancy said. “This project has demonstrated a new approach to production agriculture that benefits everyone.”

Lessons learned from the project and its positive results have implications not only for farming operations in North Dakota and across the country, but the

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development of future farm legislation and programs that make sense both for farm families and society as a whole.

## **Conservation Agriculture**

The Trust initiated Conservation Agriculture in 2000 to develop sound, workable methods for improving farm economics while promoting private water storage, conservation and improvements to wildlife habitat.

An Advisory Board of eight farmers and five conservation agency representatives selected four farms in the Drift Prairie Region of North Dakota for the project. They are operated by Tom and Kathleen Langemo, Fingal, N.D.; Clark and Susan Lemley, Hope, N.D.; Darrell and Deborah Odegaard, Egeland, N.D.; and Bruce and Sandy Teubner, Cando, N.D.

All four farmers were apprehensive about participating, but the benefits have convinced them of its value. "I feel that I'm carrying the responsibility for continuing four generations of conservation of this land on my shoulders," said Tom Langemo. "I wouldn't want to pass it on to the next generation with the resource degraded in any way."

Conservation Agriculture employs a holistic team approach to farm planning which includes economic, environmental and social considerations. Each of the four families was assigned a seven-member Resource Analysis Team of agricultural, economic and conservation professionals that hashed out challenges and developed solutions. The teams provided guidance and expert assistance; all final decisions regarding what would be implemented on the farm rested with the farmer.

"The diversity that sits in the room is unbelievable," Clark Lemley said. "When you bring them together for three hours and you talk about issues and solutions, I kind of appreciated that and I see lots of benefits to it."

Participants took advantage of several incentive programs for setting aside less productive land and enhancing conservation practices. The project also provided them new technologies, such as farm management software, hand-held computers with

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satellite imagery, and global positioning systems. Finally, a Conservation Agriculture scholarship paid tuition for Adult Farm Management courses.

## **Positive Results**

Throughout the project, a USDA agricultural economist tracked the farms' economic performance and trends relative to regional averages, and qualified specialists monitored each farm for aquatic species; avian species; carbon sequestration; soil nutrients, quality and salinity; and water quality.

From an economic perspective, the clearest trend has been a decrease of the average total percent indebtedness, a key indicator of financial viability, for three of the four farms. Other findings include:

- All four farms have a total percent indebtedness lower than the regional average.
- Seed, chemical and fertilizer expenses per cropland acre are lower than regional averages for three of the four farms.
- Government payments as a share of farm expenses averaged only 10.5 percent of total input cost.
- Spring wheat yield, an indicator of long-term sustainability, exceeded regional averages on three of the four farms.

Conservation Agriculture also demonstrated significant and positive environmental impacts. For example:

- All four farms have an increase in organic matter in their soils. Fields with higher organic matter levels and better soil aggregation often have better yields and higher quality crops.
- There has been an increase in bird breeding behavior, which is one of the key indicators of successful habitat change.
- Avian species diversity has improved, with faltering and uncommon species observed on all four farms and nesting increases observed among common species.
- Water quality has improved while wind and water erosion have decreased.

Another program outcome was increased cooperation and improved communication between the farmers and conservation agencies. For example, Lemley's

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perceptions of agency representatives and their points of view have changed for the better, a shift he believes goes both ways.

“I guess I’m looking at things just a bit differently now,” he said. “Granted, we have to look at the economics of it, because we have to derive our living from farming. I’ve tried to become more sustainable, but I think we still have a long way to go.”

### **Next Steps**

Conservation Agriculture will conclude at the end of 2005, but several of the demonstration farmers intend to continue some of the conservation practices they’ve implemented. They all say the project provided a valuable experience. All four also have submitted comments to the interim final rule for the federal Conservation Security Program, which resulted from the 2002 Farm Bill.

“Participating in Conservation Agriculture was well worth our time,” said Langemo. “It’s about working smarter rather than longer.”

Meanwhile, the project staff has developed recommendations for the local, state and federal levels based on lessons learned through Conservation Agriculture. “We’re working out solutions that have an immediate positive impact for the farmer and the environment, but we’re also striving for solutions that have long-term, far-reaching impacts,” said Clancy. “That’s the bigger goal of this program, and it’s working.”