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to Farmers for "Experience-Field Day"
Advertisement for
Roundup Ready 2 Xtend® Soybeans

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Ready for harvest in July

BY NICK OHDE

‘CONSERVATION is the best thing for the land,” says Aaron Lehman, a central Iowa farmer, “and in turn, we think that’s best for our community. If we can do what’s good for our land and utilize the nutrients that are here and keep them on the farm, it’s a win-win for us all.”

Aaron and wife Nicole raise corn, soybeans, oats and hay near Polk City. They approach conservation from a number of different angles — grass waterways, a wetland, pollinator strips, cover crops, the Conservation Reserve Program and limited tillage — but the organic crop rotation, which includes small grains, is what ties it all together.

Here, Aaron shares his views on the benefits and challenges of growing small grains in Iowa.

How does adding a small-grain crop help with soil fertility?

Small grains are really good at scavenging nutrients from previous crops; that’s one way we can improve fertility. In addition, they allow us to have an undergrowth of clover or alfalfa. In our three-year rotation, clover will be used as a green manure crop. We won’t be harvesting it for forage; we’ll simply work it back into the ground to take advantage of the nitrogen fixed by the clover. And that will lead into the corn crop we’ll have there next year.

How does your diverse rotation help with weed management?

It’s essential. Weeds are very adaptable, and having the small grains in there really breaks up the weed cycle. They provide early-season competition to weeds, and corn and soybeans just don’t have that ability. So that’s been very good for us.

How does raising small grains affect your workload?

The labor for small grains is much different than for corn and soybeans. That definitely helps spread out our workload over the entire year. We’ll be harvesting in the middle of summer, whereas everything else will be a couple months later. We use that to our advantage in trying to determine what our storage, transportation and marketing issues are.

What are some of the biggest challenges with growing small grains in Iowa? How do you address them?

To be honest, we haven’t been learning



GROWING OATS: Small grains provide a number of benefits for sustainable farming, says Aaron Lehman. There are also some challenges in managing them. “But overall, they’re working well and are a necessary part of our crop rotation,” he adds.

much about small grains over the last 40 years. We’ve been learning a lot about corn and soybeans, and how to grow them more profitably. We have quite a bit to learn on how to grow small grains profitably.

But, as with corn and beans, every year weather is always a challenge. A lot of it is just trying to make sure we have the proper methods and machinery on the farm, so when the time is right to plant or it’s time to work ground to get ready for the small grains, we’re ready.

We also have to deal with making sure we have good soil-to-seed contact. That hasn’t been an issue with corn and soybeans for quite a while as our planters have been adapted. Our seeders, for small grains, have not. So we need to do a better job of trying to make sure all of our conditions are as close to ideal as possible when we do get the chance to go.

Speaking of machinery, oat harvest is coming up quick. Do you swath or direct-cut your oats?

In the past, we’ve always taken them standing with our small-grains head on our combine (we’ve adapted our soybean head and used that to harvest oats standing), but there are challenges. Some years it works better than others.

Our organic fields have plenty of green material coming up underneath, whether that be clover or some weeds. Running that material through the combine is a challenge, so we end up cutting our oats kind of high to compensate. But when oats go down, we can’t really do that. This year,

we purchased a swather, and we’re going to explore swathing our oats and using a pickup head on our combine to harvest the grain. That might allow us to deal with some adverse conditions a little better.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of swathing and direct cutting?

If you put it in a swath, you’re always risking you’ll have some unexpected bad weather, and your windrow is going to sit there in some rain. So, if everything were perfect and standing OK, I think a lot of us would just use the small-grain head on our combine.

But if we have conditions where there’s a lot of undergrowth in our oats, I’m pretty sure we’ll be trying the swather. That way, we can let material dry out a little before we try to move it through the combine. I’ve also heard some folks say swathing can increase test weight, which is important for marketing small grains.

What kind of swather did you buy?

We got a 2320 John Deere swather: a 1984 model, gas, self-propelled, and it’s only 15 feet, which is likely better for our Iowa conditions. A lot of swathers you can find are 25 feet. They’re bigger machines and are used in the Dakotas and farther west, where conditions are drier, and a larger swath is more appropriate. But for us with the humidity we have here, a smaller windrow is appropriate for our small grains. I’m glad we found the 15-foot one.

What adjustments do you need to make to your combine to harvest small grains?

Fan speeds need to be sped up, concaves need to be tightened — beyond what you’ve ever tightened before if you’ve never done small grains. And you need to deal with all the straw and chaff going out the combine’s rear end.

Most people don’t want to chop it; they want to leave it in a windrow so they can bale it. You have to take into account what kind of combine you have, too, what kind of cylinder you’re operating with. We have an old concave machine, a 9510 Deere.

A lot of the newer axial machines have a certain amount of adjustments in equipment to deal with the straw. Those typically aren’t available in Iowa. Out West, for people who are used to dealing with wheat on a more regular basis, they have the machines suited for that. Here, you have to be a bit more careful about which machine you’re using.

Ohde writes for PFI at Ames.