

# Eagle Eye

*Gordon Wassenaar, Prairie City, Iowa*

**T**o Gordon Wassenaar, a 60-year farming veteran from central Iowa, the future of the American farmer requires an eagle-eye view – high, but focused.

*But a grasp of the 10,000' view of global ag markets would be incomplete without circling down for a closer look at the soil that supports the whole enterprise.*

*Hosting guests from all over the world, Wassenaar stresses the importance of teaming conservation with technology to meet global needs in the long term. Among his involvement with the numerous organizations that further the mission of conservation and U.S. farming interests, Wassenaar is a committee member with the Iowa Corn Growers Association, is involved with the Soil Health Partnership and is one of only six recipients of the U.S. Grains Council Lifetime Achievement Award.*

*Among other entities, Iowa Learning Farms and the Jasper County Natural Resources Conservation Service have brought crowds to field days hosted at the Wassenaar farm, where the use of cover crops, no-till farming and innovative conservation technology is demonstrated. In an area where “no-till is pretty much the standard,” his own 1,500-acre corn and soybean operation is augmented with a 700-acre partnership.*

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Farmer to Farmer Success Stories are a series of interviews of farmers sharing how they have found success in incorporating conservation into their operation. To follow this series, visit [www.HarvestingThePotential.org](http://www.HarvestingThePotential.org)

**Q:** What benefits have you seen on your farm from these systems?

**A:** We started no-till for soil erosion back in the 1990s, and the rest of the benefits have been gravy. I don't think there is any doubt that, over time, you will see a yield increase with no-till, because you are going to raise the soil's organic matter and water-holding capacity.

Cover crops provide an intensive root system and increased earthworm activity, which also helps with water holding capacity. The plants help the water percolate into the ground more slowly, while surface residue prevents raindrops from striking and breaking up the soil. Green cover crops coming up through the residue tie it all together like a map so heavy spring rains can't wash away much ground. The water coming off will be clear.

After you have no-tilled for a while, you see a better soil. Our ground is more crumbly and certainly is not as hard. It just works better. There are many new technologies now that really help, too, such as trash-whipper planters.

We have definitely seen better weed control with cover crops, too. A young weed has a very difficult time coming up through the rye early in spring. Your cover crop is catching the sunlight instead.

In the long term, your goal is to rebuild organic matter to what it was at the time of the pioneers. Europe has farmed for centuries, compared to just hundreds of years here. We will have to make sure that 100 years from now, this ground is in as good or better shape than it is now.

**Q:** How does no-till work with your cover crop and nutrient-management approach?

**A:** Cover crops are the other half of no-till. When you continually grow residue, you also grow organic matter. With cover crops, we are just doing all of this faster.

We started planting cover crops about five years ago. As of last year, all of our acres are covered. Cereal rye, which is currently our best bet in the north, is absolutely amazing. As soon as the sun comes out, it starts to green up.

In standing corn residue, we seed rye with a Case vertical till and a rolling basket to manage residue. We angle a wheat drill on the soybean ground, closely following the combine. One critical thing we've learned: Every day you delay cover crop planting is one more growing day that you lose.

Using GPS, we go through the rye late in the fall or early in the spring and rip a little 6" strip, run the fertilizer



On the farm of Gordon Wassenaar, a longtime conservation farmer in Prairie City, Iowa, Wassenaar (left) examines vigorous cover crop roots, which provide structure, cover, protection and water-holding capacity for the soil. Wassenaar's earthworm-pocked soil is enriched under no-till farming and cereal rye cover crops (center). The Tama Muscatine soil is crumbly, not hard. Cover crops and residue protect the soil and are eventually returned to it, which both mimics the area's original prairie conditions and feeds a cash crop. Aerially seeded into a standing corn crop on Sept. 3, cereal rye is 6" high by Oct. 10 (right). Cover crops have become a topic of great interest in neighboring agriculture-heavy counties, three of which are under the threat of a water-quality lawsuit from the Des Moines Water Works. The suit, slated for August, claims that drainage districts are discharging nitrates into the Raccoon River, a primary source of municipal drinking water. .



and anhydrous down it, and then plant right above the nutrients. I call it "poor man's strip till." And we always terminate the cover crop 7 to 10 days prior to planting.

Down the road, there may be other crops that could add value to an operation, such as feed to carry cow herds on. For example, livestock will go wild over early-harvested corn stalks and green cover crops with legumes. We also run a small test plot with different species.

**Q:** Counties in your region are involved in a water quality battle with the Des Moines Water Works. How do these methods factor in?

**A:** The issue is not going to be simple to solve. But if you cut erosion back, that will keep the dirt, which is carrying nutrients, out of the water. Aside from no-till, there are probably only two more things we can do right now to help water quality: Move nitrogen application rates to later in the season when the crop is growing – being careful on rates – and using cover crops. Farmers have seen where Iowa is going with water quality and have discussed how cover crops could help us get out ahead of this train. Cover crops appear to be our best weapon right now; they tend to hold nutrients and keep them from going into the soil profile.

Mandates may yet happen, but a national mandate would turn into an absolute battle royal in the state of

Iowa. A lot will depend on the landlords. If you own property, and you are threatened with fines, you will have to have a serious talk with your tenant.

**Q:** Why is adoption of these practices important for U.S. farmers and their commodities?

**A:** It's really all tied together to healthy agriculture. To export, we must be able to produce as much as we can at a reasonable cost. To do this, you first have to take care of your soil. Then you must have access to markets around the world through free and open trade. All these things are tied to the financial health of the state and of the manufacturing industry, which is heavily dependent on agriculture. If we have to cut back on acres because we can't farm them, we are not being competitive in the world.

Ultimately, though, you're still the biggest benefactor of these improvements. If you take care of your soil, your soil will take care of you.

When you get to know the needs of people from around the world, especially from countries that cannot feed themselves on their land base, you recognize the importance of American agriculture. And that comes back to your soil conservation. We've got a factory here that has to be taken care of if it's going to exist in the future. It still comes back to the land.