



KEVIN BOTTRELL/Colby Free Press

It may not be much to look at in January, but this field belonging to Steve Ziegelmeier shows the unmistakable signs of no-till farming. Ziegelmeier said he also plants switch grass and forbs grass to provide areas for wildlife such as pheasants.

'Opportunistic farmer' wins soil award

By Vera Sloan

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If any man ever had a little bit of fertile soil running through his veins, it could very easily be Steve Ziegelmeier.

With his farm home within 15 miles of where seven out of his eight great-great-grandparents homesteaded, it's easy to know why he's a farmer.

He's also the 2010 Soil Conservation winner of the Soil Conservation Bankers Award from the Thomas County Conservation District.

Ziegelmeier's methods of farming today are far different from those of his great-great-grandparents back in the days when the government was giving a quarter section of land to anyone tough enough to live on it for a year.

"It feels like I started farming as soon as I was born," Ziegelmeier said, "but I guess it really started in 1994 after

I came home from college. It's not just me; it's my wife Tamara, too. She's more than my right-hand man, she's the one who tells me what to do. She's not just my life partner, she's my business partner, too, and that's the way it should be."

He said in 1994, he would never have dreamed how advanced farming technology would be in a few short years. Today, there is hardly room in his tractor for all the monitors.

"There's been other drastic changes since I started farming, too," he said, "and I'm in awe of how big everything has gotten, from field size to equipment size."

Ziegelmeier says he is a 100 percent no-till operator who also claims a title of "opportunistic farmer." He explained that when the opportunity is right, he grabs it – if there's sufficient moisture.

"With each tillage operation, the soil can lose a half to three fourths of an inch of moisture," he said, "and (tilling) destroys the shade the residue provides."

His equipment is like that of other no-till farmers who have

gone from the conventional six-to-seven field operations to one-planting. He uses his own applicator to apply liquid fertilizer, depending what crop he is planting, and in most instances, fertilizer and seed can be put in the ground in the same operation. He said as a rule of thumb, he uses a pound to a pound and a half of nitrogen for every anticipated bushel to the acre.

Conserving field edges for wildlife is a priority for Ziegelmeier. He plants switch grass for cover and forbs grass, a broad-leaf type, to make it easier for pheasants to find food.

Ziegelmeier has other interests besides farming. His education in chemistry education allowed him to teach science for eight years at Colby Middle School. Now, most days in the winter, you can find him behind a desk, on the phone, closely watching the markets screen at ZEZ Commodities, where he works as a commodities broker.

The Ziegelmeiers have four children, Kellan, 16; twins Brook and Brennan, 13, and Kinley, 9.

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