

BRENT BIBLE
Lafayette, Indiana

Brent Bible has practiced no-till farming and the use of cover crops for several years on some of his nearly 3,000 acre farm. But it has been a scattershot approach without measurable results. By joining the Soil Health Partnership, he takes a more disciplined approach, looking for a better understanding of soil health, improvement in his operation's efficiencies and enhancement of his bottom line.

Growing up on a small farm in Indiana, Brent Bible never saw farming as a career option. He studied Agriculture Economics in college, thinking he would enter an ag-related field. Instead, he ended up as a highway patrolman. After an on-the-job injury and early retirement, Bible found himself “young and wondering what to do.”

“I owned some ground as more of a hobby, and I thought I might play around with that,” he said.

A long-time friend, Brandon Moseley, was just starting in farming, and the two decided to partner up their land and resources and work together. That quickly developed into a chance to buy and lease more acreage.

“After a few years, we found ourselves doing what I never thought I would—farming full-time,” Bible said.

Bible and Moseley formed Stillwater Farms. They grow corn, soybeans and wheat. More specifically, their corn crop includes seed production corn, waxy corn, dent corn and popcorn. The acreage has diverse soil types—everything from good, rich, sandy loam to clay loam and some tougher sandy and gravelly soil.

“Every season, we think about each field and its soil type when we determine what to plant. We consider the previous crop, whether the land is irrigated, how it holds moisture and handles drainage, plus how much of each crop we want to produce,” Bible said. “This wet year has presented us lots of challenges. Good drainage is critical. If you don’t have that in a year like this, you’ll see it.”

Strategic Farming and Soil Stewardship

Bible takes a strategic approach to farming to improve efficiency and the business's bottom line. Five years ago, he began using cover crops on several fields. He also implemented precision farming—grid soil sampling and applying fertilizer using GPS.

“We are more precise about fertilizer placement, timing and quantity,” he said. “We don't want to waste money or harm our soil by applying too much fertilizer. On our no-till, we try to be strict no-till. However, it really depends on the soil type. Sometimes a residue management till might be necessary to make the plant residue break down more easily.”

Cover crops capture nitrogen left in the soil and help build organic matter in the soil as well. For Stillwater Farms, the practice has its challenges and its payoffs. The cover crop combined with no-till sometimes means Bible has to plant later in the season to allow the soil to warm up and dry out.

“We have tried several different blends of cover crops, looking for the right combination,” he said. “It has had its challenges sometimes, but it has been a good experience overall. Our costs are lower, plus we have less erosion and run-off.”

Bible and Moseley have grown cereal rye and oats on the farm, along with tillage cover such as turnips, radishes and snow peas.

Why Join the Soil Health Partnership?

Bible found the Soil Health Partnership in 2014, after working for a few years with a producer network that advises the Environmental Defense Fund.

“We give the environmental group practical knowledge on how their vision would affect farmers if implemented,” said Bible. “We hope it educates them and leads to actions sensitive to the needs of agriculture. I have certainly learned tremendously from them about our limited resources related to the land and wildlife.

“Some say it's an odd partnership,” he chuckled. “I suppose it is in some ways. But through my relationship with them, they thought I might be interested in becoming part of the Soil Health Partnership.”

EDF's Suzy Friedman, director of agricultural sustainability, is a technical advisor to SHP. Some of the SHP partners are other well-known environmental groups, creating positive relationships between farmers and environmentalists.

Bible hopes that with the focus and discipline of the SHP, he will be able to compare and contrast his soil and crop performance and really learn something that makes a difference.

"Being in the partnership will allow me to look at trends over time that improve my soil's health," he noted. "It's a more disciplined approach that forces me to focus on cover crops and no-till over a five-year period, not just here and there."

Even early in the program, Bible began to see a difference with the cover crop implementation and how his soil looks and behaves.

But Bible looks beyond his own farming years and profitability when it comes to the program.

"We are doing something unique and exciting with the Soil Health Partnership that will keep these fields sustainable and pumping out great yields long beyond my lifetime," he said.

Find out more about the Soil Health Partnership at soilhealthpartnership.org. Reach Brent Bible at bibletroop@aol.com