Editor's note: This article is first in a series about the concept and use of no-tillage farming methods.

By Mark Watson
Panhandle No-Tillage
Education Coordinator

No-till is not just a change in farming practices. It's a change in mindset. It's a change in philosophy. It's a change in tradition and it doesn't happen overnight. I know, because as a producer in dry western Nebraska, I have been undergoing those changes for the past 15 years.

Now, I no-till—and seeing the improvements it's made in my soil, my living and my bottom line, I've changed my mind about conventional tillage methods.

I farm 3,500 acres with my brother, Bruce, 10 miles north of Alliance. Our farm has been in the family for approximately 115 years and my brother and I have been farming it together since 1973.

We have been completely continuous no-till since 1994. Our farm is dryland and center pivot irrigated. We raise winter wheat, corn, pinto beans, garbanzo beans, proso millet.

No-till is working for us. Last year our family received the state Master Conservationists Award in production agriculture. And I'm adamant enough now about no-till that I'm spending my "spare time" working as the Panhandle No-Till educator to help other producers get onto the concept.

With years of working on the family farm and a degree in Agronomy from the University of Nebraska, I'm pretty well qualified as a producer. But it has been my learn-as-you-go experience during the past 15 years that has qualified me as a "near expert" in the area of no-till.

As we know, all the book and concept learning doesn't do much good until you put those concepts into practice.

My brother and I have found with no-till farming we have been able to better utilize our resources such as labor, fuel, machinery, water and soil to produce crops on our farm.

Our input costs are reduced and our yields have been as good, or better than they were when we conventionally tilled the soil. We have also had overall better weed, disease and insect control due to proper cropping rotations.

Good residue management has also resulted in improved seedling emergence and better stands than we have previous to no till.

No-till farming has also helped us conserve our groundwater use during the irrigation season. Over the past four years we have been averaging about eight inches of water use per center pivot. Leaving the residue on the surface has greatly reduced our soil water evaporation losses. The absence of tillage has also saved soil moisture.

I feel this will become increasingly important to producers as water issues become a greater challenge to all of us involved in agriculture.

From time to time I will share more specifics with you about no-tillage farming. Like I said, no till involves a change of mindset and breaking away from the "conventional tillage" way of thinking.

People with any questions on no-till can contact me at 308-760-5259 or e-mail me at garbanzobeanfarmer_mark@hotmail.com.