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No-Till: Common Questions and Straight Answers

Q & A

No-till farming has been adopted on millions of acres in South Dakota and across the Great Plains. It's praised for improving soil health, saving fuel, and reducing erosion. But like any practice, it works best when it's part of a whole system tailored to local conditions. Here are some of the most common questions we hear from producers—along with what farmers, researchers, and decades of experience have taught us.

Q1 Why consider no-till in the first place?

A: No-till reduces soil disturbance, helping keep soil aggregates intact and residue on the surface. That means better water infiltration, reduced erosion, and healthier soil biology. Farmers like Barry and Eli Little say their no-till acres have steadily improved in organic matter and water-holding capacity—key for both wet and dry years.

Q2 Does no-till work everywhere?

A: Not always. Success depends on climate, soil type, cropping system, and management. Dr. Dwayne Beck at Dakota Lakes Research Farm points out that 'no-till alone' can fail if it's not paired with diverse rotations, cover crops, and attention to the water and nutrient cycles.

Q3 Will my yields go down?

A: Research in South Dakota and elsewhere shows that yields in no-till can match—or even exceed—conventional tillage after a transition period. However, short-term yield dips can happen, especially if compaction, residue management, or fertility aren't addressed. Over time, many farmers report higher yields in dry years thanks to improved moisture retention.

Q4 What about weeds and pests?

A: Continuous no-till with little crop rotation can increase certain weed and pest pressures. The solution: rotate crops, integrate cover crops, and consider occasional livestock grazing to break pest cycles. As Gabe Brown puts it, 'Diversity is your herbicide, insecticide, and fungicide.'

Q5 Can no-till save me money?

A: Many farmers find reduced fuel, labor, and equipment costs outweigh any increases in herbicide or cover crop expenses. Barry and Eli Little cut their fertilizer rates by half after several years of no-till with diverse rotations and saw no loss in yield.

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USDA NRCS • SD • August 2025 *www.nrcs.usda.gov/*

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Q6 What equipment changes are needed?

A: A good no-till drill or planter with row cleaners and proper down pressure is essential. Dr. Ray Weil emphasizes checking seed placement depth and ensuring consistent residue management to avoid stand issues.

Q7 How long before I see results?

A: Improvements in soil structure and infiltration can happen within a couple of years, but full biological and organic matter gains may take 5–10 years. As Ray Archuleta says, 'It's a journey, not a one-season fix.'

Q8 Is no-till the same as zero soil disturbance?

A: Not exactly. No-till minimizes disturbance, but occasional light disturbance—such as strip-till or targeted tillage—may be used in certain contexts without losing most benefits. The key is to avoid destroying soil structure or residue cover.

Q9 What's the biggest mistake new no-till farmers make?

A: Treating no-till as just 'no tillage.' Without changes in rotation, fertility strategy, and pest management, no-till can disappoint. As Dr. Beck says, 'If you take tillage out of a conventional system, you've just taken away one of its tools without adding the rest of the toolbox.'

Q10 Where can I see no-till in action?

A: Attend local soil health field days, visit operations like Dakota Lakes Research Farm, or connect with neighbors successfully using no-till in similar conditions. Seeing residue management, crop diversity, and equipment setup in person is worth a hundred PowerPoint slides.

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