

The Reluctant Pioneer

Larry Kennel, Lowpoint, Illinois

Strip Cropping in a Four-Crop Rotation

Coordinator: Larry Kennel

Location: Lowpoint, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$3,428

Grant Year: 1994

Project Number: FNC94-063

Larry Kennel switched to a four-crop rotation (alfalfa, corn, soybeans, and wheat) using no commercial fertilizers or other chemicals. This program reduced investment risk, provided better than average returns, and boosted fertility levels.

Larry Kennel was never so happy to be wrong.

When the land that Kennel was farming in 1991 changed ownership, he was told he could either stop using chemicals on his crops or he could find different land to farm. Ten years later, Kennel was honored by the Illinois Department of Agriculture as the 2001 R. J. Vollmer Sustainable Agriculture Farmer of the Year.

Although he was reluctant to make the switch, it did not take long for Kennel to realize that the move to organic farming was a good one.

"We learned we could be more profitable with crop rotations than by depending on expensive chemicals and fertilizers. And at the same time, we could reduce erosion and protect the environment," said Kennel, who ran the 270-acre Blue Heron Farm with his two brothers in Lowpoint, Illinois, in Woodford County.

Kennel, who passed away in 2002, received a SARE grant in 1994 to adapt a tillage system in which he planted in 30-foot strips. The system was a four-crop rotation (alfalfa, corn, soybeans, and



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wheat) using no commercial fertilizers or other chemicals. Planting in 30-foot strips would allow more sunlight and air to the crops than narrower strips.

"We knew from previous studies that corn planted in 30-foot strips would produce about 15 percent more yields," said Kennel.

Kennel divided his farm into two halves—one half stripped with wheat and corn and the other half stripped with alfalfa and soybeans. When the wheat reached maturity, the adjacent rows of corn were roughly the same height and did not shade it. In addition, the beans were never outgrown by the alfalfa, leaving them with enough access to sunlight.

The following year, Kennel would plant the corn and wheat where the alfalfa and beans had been and vice versa.

Kennel used a 15-foot power-take-off-driven rotary tiller to plant the corn and beans; and he used a no-till drill to plant the alfalfa, wheat, and rye. Early in the spring, Kennel would rotary till the previous crop to allow the weeds to germinate. Then he tilled the ground again before planting to kill off all the weeds.

The experiment reaped better results than he had expected. According to Kennel, weed control was "outstanding in the corn and very good in the soybeans."

"The advantage to this program is reduced investment risk with better than average returns," he added.

Soil tests also showed that fertility levels on the farm rose—partly due to using alfalfa as a green manure. And by 1994, the Blue Heron Farm was certified organic.

Kennel, with the help of Sun Foundation Center, spread the word by holding two meetings about his project—one before he started the grant and one after his grant was finished. Kennel's operation also drew media attention from several outlets. Publications such as the *Peoria Journal Star*, *Sun Foundation Journal*, and *Illinois AgriNews* covered his sustainable practices.

"When you can make money and be good stewards of the land, it is a win-win situation," Jeff Kennel, Larry's brother, told the *Sun Foundation Journal*.

By Jason Peterson