Direct Seeding on the Lustig Farm

Doug Lustig, Cottonwood, ID

We farm in a 13- to 20-inch rainfall area. The ground type ranges from steep, shallow, highly erodible ground to nice, fertile ground that is fun to farm! Our soil types range from heavy silt loam to sandy loam. The top soil ranges from 6 inches to 3 feet deep. We have been direct seeding for 6 years on some ground and on all of our ground for the past 4 years. We don’t burn stubble (other than bluegrass), and we don’t use any prior tillage. We are in a one-pass seed system.

We raise winter and spring wheat, spring barley, peas, lentils, bluegrass, oats, mustard, and hay. Our continuous crop rotation is winter wheat-spring cereal-peas or lentils-then back to wheat. We try to switch between peas and lentils to break up any chemical build-up, resistance, or both. We don’t follow that rotation strictly, but we do what we think is best to eliminate any problems we might have with any certain field. That may mean leaving a field in chem. fallow, rotating it into hay, to bluegrass, or using Clearfirst Wheat to break the rotation cycle. We have two different varieties of bluegrass - proprietary and common. The proprietary grasses are usually left in for only 4 to 5 years, which gives us a nice rotation break and a good chance to use different chemicals. We put most of our proprietary grasses on the best ground, because it is difficult to establish and grow. We put the common grasses, which are easier to establish and grow, on the poorest ground—shallow and rocky. This still gives us a profit even on our poor ground.

The drill we own is a 24-foot Concord on 12-inch spacings. It is a one-pass drill with which we can deep band anhydrous and split our dry fertilizer one-third with the seed and two-thirds in between the seed rows. This drill seems to work very well for us and our type of soils. Fertilizer placement is great, and the seed placement is fair. The drill seems to handle the residue very well. We also use a 750 disk drill when taking out hay ground or bluegrass. The last 2 years we have direct seeded bluegrass into standing stubble with the 750 drill and have gotten a good stand of grass. This eliminates stubble burning and the erosion that can follow.

We use a Degelman harrow to handle the residue after harvest. On light residue we don’t use it at all, and on heavy residue we sometimes make two passes. We try to space our passes 4 days to a week apart. This practice seems to do a better job of shattering the straw.

As far as the Roundup use, if we have any moisture in the fall, we apply Roundup in the fall and again in the spring. We try to not cut our rates, because we want the weed to die rather than only knocking it back. We are in a direct-seed system to better the soil, to save on erosion, and to better our profits — but not to save ourselves rich. We feel we can do a better job if we keep track of costs, yields, and which crops do better in what rotation. We would be rich if we could always hit the high markets, though!

We have a cow/calf operation, and we background the calves. We put the cattle on the low country pasture in April, move them to the high country pasture from June to the middle of September, return them to the low country until December, and finally move them home to feed and calve in our lot. By putting them on the fields after harvest (in September) we accomplish two things, ridding the fields of certain weeds, and feeding the cattle. They eat off the china lettuce that comes back after peas or lentils. Also, the cattle seem to do well on the volunteer grain and the residue. We don’t leave them on the fields if the ground gets wet. We also use the straw from the draws, where it is the heaviest, in our cattle operation. This eliminates the worst of our residue problems.

We have a custom swathing operation, which we have been doing for 15 years. We started the swathing business as a way to make ends meet, and it grew to where we were running two swathers, day and night. Two years ago, we sold one swather and cut our acres by half, because life was getting too short and the kids were growing up too fast! This still gives us a nice extra income, but it doesn’t take away from our family life so much.

The direct-seed system has been working well for us and our type of ground. We are always looking for new ideas and new ways of doing things.