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Andy Albertsen-District Manager

Swift Soil and Water Conservation District

**2018 Swift County Soil and Water Conservation District Outstanding Conservationists:**

**Doug and Alicia Schliep**

The Schliep family owns and operates on 930 acres in northwest Swift county. Doug’s Great Great Grandpa came to the area in 1876, and obtained four quarters, three of which the family still owns and operates. In 2006 Doug became more involved with the family farm after attending college in Willmar and Granite Falls and while working at Chippewa Valley Ethanol Company for 10 years. Currently, Doug is a full-time farmer, working closely with his father, Ron.

The Schliep’s currently run a wheat, navy bean, corn, and soybean rotation. They utilize a few different techniques to ensure their operation is producing a quality crop while also benefiting the environment. They began experimenting with cover crops in 2015 after observing the benefits in their vegetable garden and recalling their experience with alfalfa in their rotation from 1974-2013, and how it greatly improved soil structure. They started small with cover crops, planting 30 acres of radish in 2015, then gradually increasing cover crop acres each year. This fall they expect to plant 300+ acres of an oat and radish cover crop. They applied for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) through the local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2015 and 2017 to help with the cost of incorporating cover crops into their rotation the following year. In addition to improving soil health, they have noticed the cover crops have helped tremendously with weed control, to the point where they were able to reduce herbicide application in the fields with cover crops, saving time, money, and fuel. They have also witnessed an increase in pheasant activity on their cover crop stands in the fall, as it provides shelter and a food source.

Another innovative approach the Schliep’s have implemented in their operation is converting some of their tile inlets to rock inlets (also known as French drains or alternative tile intakes). They converted their first inlet back in 2014 and will be converting about 12 more inlets this fall. The Schliep’s applied for and will receive cost share from the Swift Soil and Water Conservation District to get the inlets installed. Their motivation for converting their inlets was to improve water quality as it left their fields, but they also benefit from not having a weed patch and having to farm around each inlet. Rock inlets are simple to install, and they have been implemented with great success across the area. Each rock inlet involves removing a 20’-30’ long, 3’ deep, and 4’ wide trench, taking the existing inlet, turning it 90o so it is parallel to the ground and then filling the excavated area with 1/8”-1/4” sand and rock. This allows water to flow through the rock and filter out sediment before reaching the tile line. These inlets can then be farmed thorough.

The Schliep’s look at all aspects of their operation to identify areas for improvement. One example of this was when they purchased a different combine back in 2010. They made it a point to get a chopping corn head, so they could eliminate the use of a stock chopper. While the upfront cost was higher, the investment was well worth it meaning fewer trips into the field, saving time, fuel, machinery costs and less compaction on their fields, all of which have more than offset the cost of the chopping head upgrade.

Doug also uses the latest technology when it comes to nitrogen application. Utilizing an online nitrogen tool, he inputs data from his fields, which the tool uses in conjunction with field-level climate data to help make recommendations on where and how much nitrogen should be applied. This tool has allowed him to make sure he is growing the best crop possible while not overapplying nitrogen, saving money and time, while also being environmentally responsible. Doug also utilizes a split application of nitrogen, meaning he divides the total nitrogen application into two or more treatments which helps improve nutrient uptake resulting in maximum yield. These methods of fertilizer management show that the Schliep’s follow the 4R Nutrient Management System – Right source, Right rate, Right time, and Right place.

The Schliep’s have done an outstanding job of improving their operation over the years in a way that is not only fiscally responsible, but also benefits yield, improves soil health, and reduces their environmental footprint. It is for all these reasons that they are model stewards for their land. Moving forward, the Schliep’s will continue to work towards improving their overall soil health on all their acres by expanding their usage of cover crops and potentially trying some test plots using strip till. They are constantly looking for ways to improve, because you never know where new ideas can come from, some may start from a single seed in a vegetable garden, and some may come from a changing mindset. Just like his grandpa, Doug isn’t afraid to try something new, because it just might work.