

Harmon & Gina Wilts along with daughters Elizabeth (Libby) Wilts, Hannah (and Luke) Sanders, and Katherine (Katie) Wilts Johnson of rural Kerkhoven became Swift County's latest farms certified in the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP). Andy Albertsen, District Manager for the Swift Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and MAWQCP Certification Specialist Grant Pearson from the Stearns SWCD presented each with their certifications.

Harmon, Libby, Hannah, and Katie own and operate land in eastern Swift County. The family farms together, raising corn, soybeans, and sugar beets. The daughters have been involved in the farming operation their whole lives, with their input weighing heavily into the future direction of all their farms. In Fall of 2019 they made a decision that has and will continue to impact the sustainability of their farms for years to come, they purchased a strip till machine. They refined their use of the strip tiller by using it for test plots, experimenting with the difference between shanks and coulters. They settled on coulters due to the minimal soil disturbance and proper seed bed prep. Currently, they utilize the strip tiller on all the owned and rented acres, and they have no intention of going back to conventional tillage. They've noticed a change in their heavy, high organic matter soils after just a couple years of reduced tillage. They are 'spongier' and the equipment floats across the fields more easily and doesn't pull as hard, and they've spent less on fuel as a result. Making the leap to strip till was not an easy one, and the only regret they had was not doing it sooner.

In addition to the change in tillage, they have also been addressing the open tile intakes in all their fields. They have addressed these intakes in different ways, by inserting Water Quality Intakes, which are intakes with yellow 'straws' that allow water to flow into the intake but prevent soil and crop residue from getting into and clogging the tile. They have also put tile risers on several other intakes, raising the elevation of the open intake so the water can have more time to infiltrate through the soil. Finally, they each plan to install a rock inlet (French Drain) and a Dense Pattern Tile as a replacement to an open intake. Each of these methods removes the open tile intake and allows the water to filter through the small rock or existing soil. These intake replacements are a win-win for water quality and for the operator, by keeping soil and residue out of the tile lines and allowing the operator to farm right through the area, without the need to bump around an open intake. Andy Albertsen, District Manager from the Swift SWCD said "Harmon, Libby, Hannah, and Katie are motivated producers who are always looking for ways to make better agronomic decisions."

As for the other agronomic decisions on the farm, they utilize various technologies to make sure they are being the best stewards of their land. Gridded soil samples are taken routinely and paired with yield maps they can create prescriptions for each individual field. These prescriptions include variable rate seeding (putting more or fewer seeds in the ground to optimize growth) and variable rate fertilizer application. By reviewing all their farm data on a regular basis, they can determine which parts of each field provide the greatest return on investment (ROI). "Successful farming isn't defined by the highest yields, it's about how to create the greatest ROI on each acre," Harmon says.

Their operation isn't on cruise control either. They are continually learning from the previous season and making improvements for the next. Now that they have a good understanding of how and when to utilize strip till, they are ready to tackle more soil health principles, keep the soil covered and have a living root in the soil for as long as possible. One of their short-term goals is to begin experimenting with cover crops and how they can begin incorporating them into their crop rotation. They feel cover crops can be the missing ingredient to help feed the soil microbes and protect the soil. The Wilts family are true believers that if you take care of the land, it will take care of you. But they want to do better than that, they want to improve their soil and build back their soil structure. With their efforts, they are certainly on the right track.