



'Thoughts from a Mad Man': Adaptive No-Till Management in Practice

Loran Steinlage





Flexible Mindset, Networking Propel No-Till Beyond Farm Borders

The 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow works toward net zero inputs with the goal of making his no-till operation & the agriculture industry better going forward.

By *Michelle Paulsen, Managing Editor*

On an early February day, FLOLO Farms in West Union, Iowa, may appear to be at a standstill, awaiting the battle of planting season. But while the fields remain frozen and snow-covered, Loran Steinlage's operation is as active as ever.

Steinlage, a 2020 No-Till Innovator Award recipient, is a networker constantly seeking ways to bring people together for the benefit of the community—and his community extends far beyond his farm neighbors. He and his wife, Brenda, open their home to a host of family, friends and guests looking for his advice.

"The ability to help somebody learn from themselves is probably the biggest attribute I offer," Steinlage says. "Paying attention to detail, and helping people make the right connections."

On this particular day, Ohio No-Till Farmer Legend Dave Brandt, a small business owner who uses Steinlage's corn to make tortillas, a rep from the Iowa Corn Growers Association, plus several of Steinlage's kids and grandkids, gathered.

Throughout the conversations with his guests, the 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow illustrated how his thinking beyond the borders of his farm to improve the lives of others and propel agriculture into a new frontier.

Surviving Crisis

Steinlage no-tills 750 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat, buckwheat, rye, barley and seedwheat. The operation looks drastically different than it did about 15 years ago—due to a crisis that became a pivotal day in Steinlage's life and career.

On Jan. 7, 2009, Steinlage's son, Rolan, nearly died from brain cancer. The family rushed him to emergency surgery, and doctors told the family Rolan had a 20% chance of survival beyond 1 year.



NUTRIENT-DENSE CORN. Loran Steinlage scoops up a handful of the Jimmy Red corn he sells to Jonathan Correa, a Madison, Wis., tortilla maker. "It's about building the group around you and starting to look for younger people," Steinlage says. "Let's figure out how we can help them. If the guy wants to give it a try, give him a chance and see what he can do."

"I'm like, well that just gives Jesus an 80% chance to show his miracle," Rolan says, recalling the events of that day. "They didn't know if I'd wake up, but I woke up saying, 'I like chicken.' My faith is what got me through it. I'm thankful for it every day."

The experience changed Steinlage's farming philosophy. Rather than continuing on with a traditional farming mindset in competition with his neighbors, he decided to share the knowledge he learned to make life easier for his fellow no-tillers.

"An early decision Brenda and I had to make was if we were never going to let Rolan's cancer control our lives," Steinlage says. "That's carried forward anytime we are somebody oppressed or something like that. That's why we're not."



About the 2nd Annual Conservation Ag Operator Fellowship

Loran Steinlage of West Union, Iowa, is No-Till Farmer's 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow. The fellowship program, made possible by AAI Products, aims to broaden farmers' understanding about how to realize economic and sustainability success through no-till and conservation ag by returning to the same farm all year long. No-Till Farmer's editors and industry advisors selected Steinlage, a 2020 No-Till Innovator Award recipient and recipient National No-Tillage Conference (NNTC) speaker, as this year's fellow due to his ongoing commitment to innovating on his own farm and going above and beyond to share his no-till knowledge with others.

We'll have stories, videos, podcasts and more featuring Steinlage and his operation in future issues of the Conservation Tillage Guide and online at no-tillfarmer.com/fellowship. The program culminates with a special presentation at the 2024 NNTC. Steinlage is also taking your questions about everything from equipment to marketing and beyond. Submit your question at no-tillfarmer.com/askanoperator.



NAIL YOUR NO-TILL PLANTER MODIFICATIONS

Zero

Building Structure for Farmer-to-Farmer Education Requires Time, Determination

2023 Conservation Ag Fellow finds bringing people together isn't as easy as it seems

By *Michelle Paulsen, Managing Editor*

At around 5:30 p.m. on a Tuesday night in September, no-till Loran Steinlage arrives at The Duke Piano Bar in Prairie du Chien, Wis., about an hour north from his West Union, Iowa, operation. A meet and greet event at the bar is the first stop in a whirlwind week of events for the 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow, who spent the summer organizing a group to carry on the late David Brandt's vision for a farmer-to-farmer learning center in southwestern Wisconsin.

"I've been asked to lead this whole thing," Steinlage says. "I don't feel I'm capable of leading it, but I'm doing the best I can here. When you are asked to lead a man's vision posthumously, that's a pretty tall order."

Accompanied by his wife, Brenda, and son, Rolan, the Steinlage family is spending the week focused on carrying on Brandt's wishes and the honor of FLOLO Farms' mission: bringing people together.

"The biggest thing I would stress is have to do it in a positive fashion because I've never seen anybody change somebody into change," Steinlage says.

Community Partnerships

Back at The Duke, Steinlage orders a Cold Brew Bourbon from Karyl Fritzsche, a NBCS resource conservationist he's worked with for years.

"She's one of the good ones," he jokes as he takes a drink of the cocktail, which is made with rye and sweet cream from local farms.

She is one of three businesses that Fritzsche runs in addition to her day job with the NBCS, and she's stepped in agricultural. Inspired by the soil-health-focused "Kiss the Ground" documentary, her goal is to connect



Loran Steinlage tells the crowd at the Steinwies Mound center in southwestern Wisconsin about the late Dave Brandt's vision for a farmer-to-farmer learning center. "The proposal behind this is very simple. We are here for the farm and the farmer. That's it," he says.

consumers to ag producers and build a demand for locally sourced products.

"We try to source everything locally to improve our watershed health and reduce fossil frequency here," Fritzsche says. "We're at the mouth of the Wisconsin and Kickapoo rivers and adjacent to the Mississippi River, so flooding is a huge concern for our watershed."

By partnering with 4th Parallel, a local family-owned craft distillery, and Baten Maf & Ingredients Co., a locally owned milling business, Fritzsche has created a market for local farmers' multi-grade grains. This provides the opportunity to diversify their operations, which improves soil health and the health of the watershed. But it's certainly not the easy route to a business owner.

"I serve food and beverages almost exclusively from local producers," Fritzsche says, "but that means I'm going to 20 places to get products for my restaurant. As it grows, that's not feasible. There's a broken system for market

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access for commercial businesses to get these products."

After talking with Fritzsche and another producer who came to the meet and greet, Steinlage proposes a toast of Honor Wink, a corn lager made by Rajat Rock Brewing Co. in Decatur, Iowa. The beer is made with Brandt's Jimmy Red corn, and the name is a nod to the mentor that made the Cavell, Ohio, no-till pioneer famous.

"To Dave," Steinlage says, raising his glass, honoring the No-Till Legend whose vision is about to unfold over the next 2 days.

Defining the Vision

In the months before his unexpected death, Brandt had been working with the Dominican Sisters of St. Annas to establish a farmer-led learning center on their property in Stassano, Wis. The goal was to have a well-positioned regional center to teach farmers in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Minnesota about no-till, cover crops and other sustainable farming practices.

In the wake of Brandt's death in May, several no-tillers took up the torch and formed a steering committee to carry on Brandt's vision. Steinlage, a member of Brandt's, was named head of the steering committee's national group and tasked with not only organizing the committee's vision, but also pulling together a public memorial event at the Stassano location in a matter of weeks.

"Let's just say it's been very educational," Steinlage says with a laugh.

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"The way we farm, having a plan goes out the window quick. We're constantly adjusting to whatever is happening right now..."

— Loran Steinlage, 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow, West Union, Iowa
See November 2023 issue

Steinlage believes the future of agriculture is companion cropping and achieving net zero inputs, impact on water quality and emissions.

See April 2023 issue

Evolution of a No-Till Operation Through Farming's Four Seasons

No-Till Innovator Loran Steinlage shared insights about his operation and farming philosophy as No-Till Farmer's 2023 Conservation Ag Operator Fellow.

Paying attention to every detail on the planter is critical, and Steinlage's highly modified planter set him up for a successful season.

See August 2023 issue

Drought hurt Steinlage's soybean yields and forced him to cut back on his relay-cropped acres, but the dry weather proved the resilience of his healthy soils.

See p. 50

View Steinlage's 2023 Year

