

Jones SWCD news article for the month of
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from

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For Immediate Release

Conservation Conversation

Thoughts on the Number “5”

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It takes at least thirty years in the state of Iowa to develop just one inch of new topsoil under ideal conditions, according to Iowa State University Extension. That amounts to around 150 tons per acre of new soil over that time, or five tons per acre per year. If we are losing more than that amount to soil erosion we are having a negative impact on the long term productivity of our land. Five tons sounds like a lot of soil, because it is! Consider the following:

If every acre of corn in Jones County grew 200 bushels to the acre last year—no small feat—and each of those bushels weighed a standard 56 pounds per bushel, you would have grown just over five tons of corn on each of those acres. In Iowa, a soil loss of that amount is considered a nominal, or acceptable, amount because it approximates the amount of new soil that can be created every year. For many of us, our actual soil loss can often be much higher than that. Heavy rains have cut gullies in our fields over the last two growing seasons on our farm. Even shallow gullies can amount to soil losses of five or six times the nominal rate.

Now imagine if every bin in Jones County was filled with topsoil instead of corn. Or if every grain truck you met on the highway was filled with black soil instead of grain. That’s a lot of dirt! But it is just how much dirt we would lose every year if we only sought to maintain the amount of topsoil we have right now!

If we consider the problem from that viewpoint, that for every barge load of corn floating down the Mississippi there is a barge load of soil that went with it, we can begin to consider the importance of methods that will help us minimize that loss. Many methods are simple practices, like contour cropping or minimizing tillage to enhance residue management. In more severe situations, the producer may want to build a structure like a pond or a series of terraces to control runoff and keep the soil on the farm. There are literally dozens of ways we can reduce runoff to maintain the productivity of our farms and acreages.

The most important thing we can do, particularly this time of year as we cover every acre, would be to take an inventory of those areas that might benefit from a new approach toward soil conservation and consider what steps we can take to address them. A technician from the NRCS office in Anamosa might be able to provide valuable input to find the solutions that are right for your farm.

In Iowa we are blessed with productive soils that have provided a livelihood for many of our families for generations. When we consider just how much five tons of soil amounts to, we realize it is up to us to keep those blessings coming.

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