

Conservation, Efficiency Important As Farm Fuel Prices Climb

LEXINGTON, KY.

With farm diesel fuel inching ever closer to \$4 per gallon and no relief in site, farmers need to find ways to lower their usage as another production year begins.

"Everybody's looking for ways to cut fuel usage and increase their efficiency," said Tim Stombaugh, agricultural engineer with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. "Don't do the field work if you don't need to, and I'm talking primarily about tillage. Think seriously about moving from a conventional tillage system to a conservation or no-tillage system."

Switching from tilling fields to no-till production practices reduces the number of passes across fields and reduces fuel use. Combining tasks as you go across the field also can help.

Every little bit of savings will help with farm fuel and oil expenses forecast to increase 12.6 percent in 2008 following an 11.5 percent rise in 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. Annual average fuel prices have registered six straight double-digit percentage increases. Projections show a 159 percent increase from 2002 through the end of 2008, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service.

Stombaugh said there are other things farmers can do as well to increase their fuel efficiency. Match the implement to the tractor.

Often tractors are much larger than they need to be for the implements they pull through the field. Matching the tractor and implement will make the whole system work more efficiently, he said.

If you must use a tractor that is too large for the implement then remember to "gear up and throttle back." Running in a higher gear with a lower throttle setting will help the tractor operate more efficiently.

Properly ballast the tractor. Tractors are often not properly ballasted, because there's not the desired amount of wheel slip. For field work the best wheel slip is 10 percent, which is more than a lot of people are comfortable with, but this is where the tractor operates most efficiently, he said. Also watch for distribution between the front and rear of the tractor and make sure it is balanced properly.

Appropriately inflate tires. Often tires are over-inflated for the job. One study showed that by reducing the tire pressure from 28 PSI to 14 PSI, the lowest rate recommended by the manufacturer, they were able to increase field capacity by 11 percent and increase fuel efficiency by 26 percent.

Finally, Stombaugh said keeping equipment well maintained can aid in fuel efficiency. Keep the filters clean and the machine well lubricated. Δ