



Pete and Pam Hunter

Coahoma County, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Belmont Planting Co./Stovall Plantation

Cotton, corn, wheat grain sorghum and commercial vegetables

## Soil health is key to success at Stovall Plantation

Pete Hunter officially ended his farming days “on a good year,” however, he remains actively involved in farming since Stovall Farms rents its land to two younger friends and Hunter helps with the farm management of the combined farmland – a total of 11,000 acres.

A National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) Soil Health Champion, a former cattleman for 11 years and a producer in Coahoma County, Hunter has been farming for more than 40 years. He implements as many best management practices as possible for conservation, and has practiced reduced tillage on his Delta farmland since 1990, combined with no-till cotton. In 2012, Hunter received a Cropland Conservationist Award in the Delta and the state. He was recognized for his accomplishments in the application and promotion of conservation practices on cropland.

Hunter planted cover crop many years ago, which he combined with land forming and precision land-leveling. Since the land is flat in the Delta, most of the land there has been land-formed. If the land is not flat, it is made flat with a slight slope for drainage.

The practice of planting a cover crop behind land-leveling procedures goes as far back as the 1960's, Hunter said, adding that more modern cover crop practices started around 2009 in his area.

“Reduced tillage basically was more economical for what I was trying to accomplish,” Hunter said. “It would reduce compaction and basically kept me from tilling the soil.” Hunter soon noticed that the tilth of the soil changed, and there were more earthworms.

He combined land forming with installing pipes and pads, installing two-stage ditches with weirs, and practicing minimum tillage or no-till, which reduced inputs in production agriculture while maintaining good yields. Hunter utilizes GPS Grid Soil Sampling and variable rate GPS application of fertilizers. He utilizes split applications of fertilizer, integrated pest management, closed chemical mixing systems and other practices to prevent off-target spraying including air induction tips, reduced pressure and lower boom heights. To control drift, he utilizes time-release treatment of nitrogen fertilizers.

Planting more modern cover crops, such as cereal rye, not only aids in soil retention from wind or water erosion, but also aids in weed control. He also plants wheat as a cover crop on some areas of the farm, which helps with erosion and runoff.

To improve water quality, Hunter utilizes a tail water recovery pond for irrigation. This aids residue management and ensures that nutrients and soil particles, as well as adverse chemicals and fertilizer runoff, stay on the farm.

Hunter acknowledges that minimum- to no-till has led to the introduction of new pests and problems that are normally not a problem with tillage, such as fire ants, snails, slugs, diseases and residue management. “Because of the introduction of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and minimum tillage, fire ants have moved into the Delta. A funny thing about the Delta – in a no-till bean field, you go into the low bottoms and you have crawfish chimneys that you have to dig out of the combine; across the ridges you have to dig the ant hills out of the combine.” Still, the benefits from these conservation practices and soil health outweigh the problems that occur, Hunter said.

Challenges faced by farmers include the need to spend money at a time of year that maybe money is not readily available, Hunter said, adding that farming profits are so thin now that it is hard to spend money in that respect. Local producers are also faced with the challenge of getting good soil-health practices funded on a cost-share basis. “Only one out of three applications can actually be funded in the short term. Also, with depressed commodity prices, farmers are struggling to match funding contracts.”

His solution to these problems on his farm is to put a long-range plan in motion to slowly accomplish soil-health goals, which will benefit productivity, profitability, and soil health to make the farm sustainable in tough times.

“Our soil is the money-maker on our farms, and many of the soil health practices we implement have increased our profitability by increasing yields, and at the same time reducing overall costs.”

In 2012, Hunter received the Cropland Conservationist Award in the Delta and in the State, recognizing him for his accomplishments in the application and promotion of conservation practices on cropland. President of MACD, Hunter serves as an alternate for Mississippi on the NACD Board of Directors. He and his wife, Pam, enjoy hosting tours and visits on the farm and seek various opportunities to promote soil health and conservation. They have 4 grown children and 6 grandchildren.