Otis Thomas Funches
SWCD: Bolivar/Sunflower counties
Farms family land
Soybeans, winter wheat (corn 2018)

Funches plants new life in soil of family farm

By Kathy Dougan, MSWCC

It is early December 2017, and Otis Funches is planting 50 acres of winter wheat cover crop on his 250-acre farm in Bolivar County. As he plants, Funches has faith that the predicted rains will fall to nurture the wheat seed. The cover crop will not only improve soil health and reduce tilling and erosion, but also will help kill out pigweed, which is a huge problem in the Mississippi Delta. Funches got approval from the NRCS to plant the wheat, a variety which was genetically engineered specifically as a cover crop.

This, however, is not the first time a cover crop has been planted to improve soil health on the Funches family farm. When Otis Funches' father, Walter Funches, purchased his 40-acre farm in Shaw, MS, in 1939, he planted cotton, soybeans and cover crop. "My parents planted alfalfa clover. It helped the yield," Funches said.

Funches has worked with the NRCS and FSA to implement Best Management Practices on his farm, which is located between Sunflower and Solomon, MS. On the flat Delta land, he has put in water wells and leveled off the property to promote drainage. He has installed control pads and a drainage system that is controlled by a computer, allowing him to irrigate when needed and to close off the system when there is rain. Water sensors indicate when he should stop watering to keep from flooding the fields, he said.

Although his farming operation is not 100 percent no till, Funches is moving in that direction. He currently grows soybeans, discing back into the soil after harvest. He doesn't have a compost

area set up yet, but is interested in composting. “Some neighbors have connections with chicken houses and swap out corn for chicken litter,” Funches said. “I might try to put some of that out to increase the yield.”

After about five years of controlling the water in his fields, Funches has noticed an increase in his soybean yield. “Last year I had a yield of 70 bushels on a 75-acre field,” he said. The previous year the same 75-acres yielded 55 bushels. “I’m impressed with genetically altered soybeans and how they grow at a higher yield,” he said.

“There’s really no problems with the fertile, Delta land,” he said, adding that he just needs to make sure he puts the right stuff back in the ground and rotates his crops, which he said is critical for the Delta farm land. “Crop rotation will help build it.”

Funches, whose father deeded the farm to him in 1989, moved to California, where he taught science for 32 years in San Diego Public Schools. A good friend helped Funches keep the farm going while he was in California. He came home during his summer breaks from teaching, just in time to harvest. He initially grew cotton and soybeans, however, when the bottom fell out of the price for cotton, he switched to soybeans. He is contemplating planting corn next year in rotation with his soybeans, depending on the market price for corn.

Funches has noticed that no till and minimum till have been able to eliminate a lot of erosion. “Minimum tillage allows you to maintain the soil without erosion,” he said.

Keeping the farm in the family is important to Funches, and he has talked to his children and grandchildren about the land, and the importance of farming. “A lot of people, especially black people, have gone to the cities,” he said. He encourages those who have left family farms and land to come back to the South and farm again. “This is not your grandfather’s farming procedures. Everything is technologically changed; genetically modified,” he said. “Seeds grow better than they did back when Daddy was farming.”

He acknowledges that farming is hard work, however, he wouldn’t trade it for the world. And he’s hoping his children and grandchildren will feel the same way and continue the tradition.