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THE BOOK SHELF

Father-Son Team Offer New Ideas

By Tom Byrd
NCSU Agric. Comm.

WAKE FOREST — Huel Choplin thinks of himself as a conservation farmer. His son Connie, says, "We are like organic farmers."

Whether the right word is "conservation" or "organic", the father-son partners of Hillcrest Farm near here have developed their own farming style. And some people believe the Choplin style has a lot of merit for the 1980s.

"Top hogs are our end product," said Connie. Hillcrest can turn out several hundred thousand pounds of pork a year.

To produce this pork, the Choplins strive to use their farm resources to the fullest. These include land, water and hog manure.

The manure is used to fertilize corn. The corn is used to feed hogs. The hogs, in turn, produce more manure.

The manure will not completely fertilize the corn. But it is applied first, and then a soil test is made to see what additional plant nutrients are needed.

The Choplin style of farming has been caused by two things: concern for the environment, and the price-cost squeeze that most farmers, especially hog farmers, have been in for the last few years.

Manure that was once a headache is now regarded as an asset. It is caught in a lagoon and then applied to the Choplin land through a big-gun type irrigation system.

Applications are made during fall and winter, when the fields are fallow and the manure can be disked in immediately. This reduces odor problems, because as Huel Choplin says, "We are concerned with our neighbors."

The Choplins' use of manure rather than letting it seep into nearby streams has excited those agencies concerned with water quality standards of the Environmental Protection Agency.

One person who has followed the Choplin experience closely is Fred Koehler, a biological and agricultural engineer with the N. C. Agricultural Extension Service. Koehler has set up a monitoring station on the Choplin farm to see if any plant nutrients

are washing into nearby streams. The answer is "no" despite the hilly nature of the farm.

Hillcrest Farm is non-polluting because the Choplins apply the liquid manure carefully. They also have seeded grass waterways, plowed on the contour, and turned under old crop residue to stop erosion.

They, like Koehler, believe pollutants are misplaced assets.

"Sediment that clogs up a stream is actually topsoil for growing crops," Koehler said. "Fertilizers and chemicals can't make money for a farmer if they are floating down a river."

Along with using the farm manure and protecting the soil, the Choplins believe in managing their water. They have constructed three ponds and invested thousands of dollars in irrigation equipment. The equipment, the same as that used to apply manure, was used this past summer for six applications of fresh water to their 85 acres of corn.

"Without irrigation, we wouldn't have made 20 bushels," said Huel, reflecting on last summer's severe drought. "As it was, we averaged 130 bushels." This was twice the per acre yield average in the state.

The Choplins have hopes of winning the Wake County corn contest again in 1980. If they do, it will be the third year in a row — a record they attribute mainly to irrigation.

Another Choplin goal, as a part of their conservation farming, is to reduce energy usage. They have switched to electric pumps for their irrigation system and to electric motors for grinding feed. They find this about half as expensive as using the power take-off on a tractor.

The Choplins once rented land

— about 300 acres — scattered all over northern Wake County. Fuel costs have prompted them to pull back — to make better use of the resources on their home farm. And they believe this new farming strategy is paying dividends.

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