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Interview with Doug Gifford

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Doug Gifford

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Interview with Doug Gifford
Soil and Water Conservation office of Mount Vernon
2/23/96
interviewer: Alisoun Davis

ad: Mr. Gifford, could you please explain the process of why people till in the first place?

dg: Tillage is really used to prepare a seed bed for planting crops. That is traditionally why tillage is done. To begin with, it is to prepare a seed bed and eliminate weeds and competition with the crop.

ad: Okay, is there some kind of form of airation? Is that what they call it?

dg: Turning the soil over with tillage typically incorporates air into the soil, just with the turning process.

ad: Okay, now, Mount Vernon has been called the "No-till Capital of the World" at one time.

dg: mhmm.

ad: Is that true?

dg: That's true.

ad: Is that still true today?

dg: Probably not as much as it once was. Knox County, the personnel in this office, were very progressive in promoting no-till. As the years have gone by, no-till has spread to other parts of the state or other parts of the country and there are probably other counties that are comparable with no-till with Knox County. But Knox County has always been pretty progressive as far as promoting no-till.

ad: What does no-till mean to you?

dg: No-till is simply planting a crop into the soil without doing any tillage operations before planting.

ad: Okay, now. As far as chemical use instead of tilling....what can you tell me about that?

dg: That's a big issue. I think some people have the thought that you are either doing tillage or you are using chemicals with no-till, and that is not necessarily true. Over the past few years--many years, really--there's been a lot of chemicals used along with tillage. No-till uses chemicals to control weeds; that's the purpose of using chemicals. Like I said, a lot of conventional tillage has also used chemicals. So, there's not really a comparison of one or the other.

ad: Okay, what is the norm in this county? Is it, most people don't till and use chemicals, do you know that?

dg: I would say probably a large number do do no-till. There's also a large number of farmers that do some sort of tillage, whether it be full tillage or some type of conservation tillage--where part of the residue is being tilled but not all of it turned under--and a lot of those are using chemicals along with tillage for weed control.

ad: Do you farm?

dg: No, I do not farm.

ad: If the soil....I don't know if you've ever read the Dr. Seuss book The Lorax.

dg: huh-uh.

ad: Okay, it's the Lorax who speaks for the trees. You're Doug Gifford, you speak for the soil. What would you like to have done? Do you have a vision for the soil in the county?

dg: Well, I guess my job is to help landowners keep their topsoil where it's at; in the field where it should be, where it can be used to raise crops. It's to keep it there and keep it out of the waterways, the ditches, and things like this.

ad: How do you that?

dg: Well, a lot of it depends on the slope, the type of soil, what the person who is using the farm wants to do with it...using the land, I shouldn't say farm. Typically, we try and promote less tillage on farms and try and promote grass seedings, hay seedings, keeping some type of cover out there on the soil. I guess that's what I consider...my job is to keep the soil where it's at.

ad: So that is best done by, say, after a corn crop is harvested, planting like winter wheat or winter hay or something that'll...

dg: Yea, cover crops always are a help, keeping the residue in place is a help. I think sometimes people have the idea that no-till is a cure to soil erosion. Well, that's not necessarily true. If you're comparing no-till to conventional farming, yes, a lot of times it is. But there's also--especially in the eastern part of the county--a lot of steeper fields that even no-till does not keep the soil in place like grass, such as a hay field or a pasture field. There are a lot...how you approach keeping the soil in place depends on the soil a lot of times, and the topography.

ad: Do you go to farmers, or do farmers come to you with these questions.

dg: Typically it's been they'll come to us and ask for our services to help them. It's kind of rare that if you were just out and about that you would simply stop somewhere and say 'I see you're having this problem. Can we help you?' Most of our work is done on a request basis.

ad: And how do you see where there's problems?

dg: That's a tough question. If soil erosion is to the point that you can see it, then there's already been a lot of damage that's been done. Most of the damage done by soil erosion is done by erosion that you can't see. Year after year, a thin layer of soil is being down the hill, and you can't really see the normal planning or tillage operations will cover that up, will fill in those little rills before they're even rills that you can't see. Once erosion gets to the point that you're seeing it in the form of a gully or are able to see soil running off a field, then there's been a lot of damage done. It's really hard to see the problem of erosion until a large amount of damage has been done.

ad: Do you think farmers see it in their yields? Can they tell from that?

dg: Yes they can. That's one of the challenges we have is over the years, improved seed varieties, improved fertility management, improved weed-control strategies have tremendously improved yields. We have a yield contest here every fall, and you can look back over the yields the last, say, twenty year [sic]...even in that amount of period, yields have improved. Sometimes those problems can mask an erosion problem. We hear sometimes, 'Well, I don't have an erosion problem, because my yields have improved.' Well, a lot of times those things I mentioned have covered up an erosion problem. So, sometimes it can take many years before erosion can get to the point that it starts hurting yields, and, by that time, enough damage has been done that it's difficult--or it takes a long time--to correct that.

ad: Now, on the water side, do you monitor streams?

dg: No, that's not something that we, no. I'm not even sure who would do that. I suppose EPA. That's more EPA's line. That's not something that we typically get into. No.

ad: Do you have any knowledge of, like, I don't know...Okay, the chemical goes in, now, it was explained to me [by Ron Hawk] that after ninety days or something, it [the chemical] dissipates into the air, but it seems like...

dg: Well, that depends on the chemical. There's a wide array of different types of chemicals. A lot of chemicals work on different chemical bases. There are some chemicals or herbisides, whatever, that once it comes in contact with the soil, it's basically deactivated. There are other chemicals or pesticides that can persist for more than a year or for longer amount of times [sic]. To say that a chemical is in the environment or to say that a chemical is there for a certain....that ranges so much with the different chemicals that that's....it's just a tough question. I mean there's a lot of different chemicals being used and a lot of different process by which that they're deactivated in the environment.

ad: You were telling me that you are originally from a different part of the state.
dg: I'm from south east Ohio.

ad: Now, did you work in the same type of business there too.

dg: Well, I was raised on a dairy farm. I was raised on a farm there. This is my first job as far as with the, in the soil conservation.

ad: Okay, even without actually having done soil conservation there, as far as a job...can you tell about Knox County as far as the environmental concern among farmers or among people who buy the goods, consumers. How does it compare, do you think?

dg: Oh, I would say farmers or consumers are pretty much the same no matter where they go. People want a safe food supply. I guess Knox County, or even the United States has the most productive and the safest food supply in the world. Farmers are very concerned about a safe food supply and safe drinking water. They live in the environment and they're as much concerned about it as anybody else. I really don't see much difference no matter where you go, I suppose. People like safe food.

ad: Okay, do you see....is there some new type of technology or some old type of technology that we need to be thinking about for the future, as far as soil and the environment and...

dg: I wouldn't say as far as technology. I would say as far as the way farming is done now, compared to what it used to be. A typical farm might have been 200 acres, half of that was crops, half of that might have been pasture or hayland--typically had a lot of hay in your rotations--and soil erosion was kept in check pretty good that way. Agriculture is taking the trend, or has been taking the trend towards livestock that is raised is raised in more concentrated areas. A lot of the fields that once had hay in their rotation half the time or were pasture, are now being used to raise row crops three out of four, four out of four years. I think in a lot of those situations, the erosion might be higher now than it was then. I think there's a real challenge out there for us to show what damage can be done by soil erosion. But as far as technology, no, I really don't see any....as far as the chemicals, a lot of the chemicals being used today are different than they were, than the chemicals used twenty-five years ago. Their chemistry is different. A lot of the chemicals are made--especially the herbicides--are made to attack a specific, say a certain enzyme or a certain specific site or plant. We're not talking about DDT or some of the ones that were used way back when. To me, that's probably the biggest change that we've seen, is in the chemistry, the herbicides, the chemicals.

ad: Okay, now I've asked you some questions. What am I missing?

dg: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what to answer to you.

ad: Okay. Do you have any questions about what we're doing?

dg: Yea, I want to know what you're doing. What's the focus of your project, or what's the idea, or what you're trying to accomplish with your project?

ad: Well, we are working on a three-year project. Last year's group did a thirteen-part radio series called Rural Delivery, and this year we decided to use the World-Wide Web and, with KnoxNet now being set up, we thought we could reach more people. And we are talking about the phenomenon of family farming in Knox County. We are mostly people who aren't brought

up in rural areas, and so have no exposure to this kind of thing at all. And we are just trying to raise an awareness of how important it is, how it's affecting everything in the area, and get people thinking about that in terms of there's a lot of planning going on. We've been involved in Focus 2100, different things, and say, you know, if this is something you want to keep, how, what other things have to be done? You know, what kind of zoning, that kind of thing. So just raising people's awareness about the tenor of the community and how that might change if the family farm is completely gone, or even what IS a family farm? It's so hard to define these things. That's what we're about. So, the group is split up and we're discussing different sections: there's Farm Economy, Farming and the Environment--which I'm in--, Farming Organizations in the Community, the History of Knox County....we're just trying to put a Web page together that is out there for anyone who wants to see it. And for people in the county can interact with it and let us know what they're thinking. So, we're just trying to hear as many voices as we can and understand it as well as we can.

dg: Family farm. I think a lot of people are concerned that the farmers, the farms, the size of farms are typically larger than they used to be. Like I said before, the typical farm was being a couple hundred acres. People raised cows and sheep and chickens and I think things have got to the point where there's a push, I think, for specialization. I think we've become so much more efficient at raising crops and yields are so much higher than they used to be. The equipment is such that you can farm a lot more acres than you used to be in the same amount of time. No-till has certainly shortened the hours that was needed to produce an acre of a crop. You can use that time to raise more crops.

I don't know. I don't know what the trends going to be. I think the trends going to continue to be that way, towards bigger farms, less farms. I don't know. I can't really say if that's good or bad. As long as there's a good supply of food, a good supply of safe food, who can say whether it's good or bad?

ad: Is there any kind of connection between--I'm thinking in terms of family farming--like people who live on the land that they farm, as opposed to big corporation farms, where it's not necessarily you live there. I don't know if you have any experience with whether....

dg: I think people typically are more prone to take, they might be a little bit more concerned about their own land than they are about somebody else's. As far as corporate farming, I don't think that's, I wouldn't consider Knox County to have a large amount of corporate farming. Yes, the farms are larger, there may be fewer may be fewer farms but larger-acrege farms...

ad: You mean than there used to be?

dg: Yes.

ad: Okay.

dg: But, I think typically they are, by and large, they are still run, they are still family farms. They are still a family business. I wouldn't consider Knox County to be a large area of corporate farming, no.

ad: Well, those are all the questions that I have at this point that I can think of. Is there anything else that you can think...

dg: No, not that I can think of. If you have any questions, or anything that you decide later that I haven't covered, then feel free to get ahold of me.

ad: Well, thank you.

dg: I'd be interested in seeing some of what you talked with.

ad: Well, I see you have computers, so hopefully you can.

dg: Oh, yea, and we are, you said Knox Net. We're in the process of trying to get hooked up with that.

ad: Well great. I thank you very much. I really appreciate your talking with me today.