



Mike Belan chosen as 2020 Innovative Farmer of the Year

Every year, the Innovative Farmers Association of Ontario selects an Ontario farmer who is committed to soil health, environmental stewardship, and progressive thinking. In 2020, Mike Belan of Belan Farms is the deserving recipient.

Mike Belan is a third-generation farmer (and the third to be named Mike Belan) farming in Lambton county on Brookston clay loam soil along with his father, Mike Sr, and uncle, Tony. In 1975, Mike Belan's father bought his first farm and since then, the family has farmed within one to two miles of the original farm. Today, they farm just over 1,000 acres.

The 1980s were tough for farmers and the Belans were not exempt from that financial strain. Most of their farm equipment was sold because of this and they essentially had to make no-till work to remain viable. In the early 90s, the Belans were using a John Deere 750 no-till drill to plant their wheat and soybeans. They also developed a method to plant corn with the drill, an uncommon practice, but they made it work because they already owned the drill. Today, they continue to use the original 750 drill to plant wheat, soybeans, and cover crops and use a planter to no-till their corn. "If you don't have it, you can't use it," says Mike Belan Sr. referring to relying on tillage equipment in tougher planting years.

After maintaining no-till practices for so long, weed pressure for the Belans has become minimal because there is little soil disturbance. They have also found maintaining a good crop rotation helps mitigate weed pressure.

Maintaining a rotation of corn, soybeans and wheat is a priority for the Belans as they feel it mitigates some risk of harsh weather. To help with this, their large acre farms are subdivided into 50-acre sections to mitigate risk and maintain crop rotations. While this set up can be hard on logistics, they feel it is doable. In 2014, they integrated an oats and radish cover crop ("nothing crazy" says Mike Jr.) for the first time. Now, they use a five species mix of oats, radish, peas, vetch, and triticale. The Belans have modified their existing equipment to interseed their cover crops and improve establishment in corn while using a split rate Y drop during nitrogen application.

While the Belans have noticed the soil benefits of implementing cover crops, they have also added value to the farm business through the addition of a few heifers to graze the cover crops and sell direct to consumers. If it were more easily accomplished, Mike says he would bring livestock in for all their acres. The Belans also note that weed pressure after soybeans is still minimal because there is enough cover from the over wintering cover crop.

The concept of building and maintaining soil health really started to strike a cord in the Belans' way of farming in 2012. After hearing Blake Vince and Dave Brandt speak the Belans began to think about integrating cover crops to improve soil health and reduce input costs and compaction. They realize the ag industry is only re-learning how important soil biology is and Mike Belan Sr. finds worm middens fascinating. The Belans began to ponder moving the assessment meter from yield to profit and consistency. Consistent yield is more valuable to the Belans than a rollercoaster with some years of high yield. While they maintain above county average yields, their soil testing suggests their soils are being maintained but never in excess. The Belans have considered increasing their yields by adding more nutrients but constantly evaluate how those costs will affect their return on investment. They keep a close eye on their nutrient levels though, because the soil can quickly get behind on nutrients when there isn't much to begin with and good crops are soaking up much of what exists.

Implementing new practices, like planting into a four-foot-high cover crop, can be an unnerving experience. Knowing neighbours and farmers at the coffee shop are watching (and at times, scoffing),

adds to the stress. The Belans however, have seen the beneficial impact from cover crops such as reduced soil erosion, increased water filtration, and reduced compaction, and now they wouldn't farm any other way. They like the results they see and strongly encourage farmers to give no-till and cover crops a fair chance. To the Belans, a fair chance is not a one-year trial, but rather a commitment of four to five years on 20-30 acres. If you are on the fence about cover crops, they agree that you will only see a headache the first year. Over time however, you will notice a difference in your soil erosion concerns, water infiltration, and yield in compacted areas of the field.

The Belans feel 2019 was an eye-opening year with big storms and crazy weather that resulted in extremely difficult farming challenges. And see that type of weather happening more frequently. They feel equipping themselves with adaptive farming practices like cover crops and focusing on consistency rather than high yields will help weather those future storms.