

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND ROLE OF THE GEORGIA CONSERVATION TILLAGE ALLIANCE, INC. AND LOCAL CONSERVATION TILLAGE ALLIANCES

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The use of residue management, also called conservation tillage, no-till, and strip-till, continues to increase in Georgia. We now have more no-till cotton than any other state in the U.S. and the use of these conservation practices to produce peanuts and other crops increases each year. Among the reasons farmers are switching to residue management are reduced soil erosion; fuel, labor, equipment, money, and time savings; equal or slightly increased crop yields; increased soil organic matter; improved soil quality; reduced runoff and increased water infiltration; restored productivity on eroded land; improved air and water quality; and improved wildlife habitat.

Research on this conservation practice is lacking in our state. Farmers developed many of the proven concepts and most successful methods and are very willing to share this information with their fellow man. Every farmer should not have to “invent the wheel” each time they want to begin using residue management practices. Therefore, the agricultural leadership in Georgia recognized a need for a united effort to provide timely information to farmers wanting to adopt crop residue management. An organization meeting for the Georgia alliance was held in December 1993. Soon thereafter, a Steering Committee was formed to develop the framework for a successful program. It was recognized early on that farmers should be heavily involved in this process. Also, commodity groups, grower associations, universities, researchers, agribusiness, and government agencies volunteered to participate.

During 1994, the Steering Committee met monthly to establish a solid foundation for the Georgia Conservation Tillage Alliance, Inc. (GCTA). A mission statement and name were selected. Bylaws were developed and the GCTA was incorporated. During the growth process, we received valuable guidance from representatives of the North Carolina alliance.

The GCTA members elect the Board of Directors at the annual meeting. Six of the board members must be farmers. The Board of Directors, who serve a three-year

term, elects the officers of President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

Many outstanding activities have been and are being carried out by the GCTA and its members. Numerous conservation tillage field days, tours, demonstrations, field trials, meetings, and one-on-one consultations have been held. Members give programs on crop residue management on a regular basis. Farmers and others are welcome to visit member's farms to view the crop residue management systems first hand. Farmers from as far away as Argentina have visited some of our farms. Other activities of the GCTA include field trials on new cover crops; participation at the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition and Farm S.M.A.R.T. Conferences; assistance to the CSRA Conservation Tillage Demonstration Farm; and the formation of local conservation tillage alliances. Local alliances such as the Coffee County CTA and the East Central Georgia CTA have been very instrumental in the widespread use of crop residue management.

In the past, crop insurance was not available on cotton and peanuts produced with no-till and strip-till. The GCTA was instrumental in getting this changed. Crop insurance is now available for both crops produced with conservation tillage.

Another major activity of the GCTA was the development of the “Soil Quality Card for Georgia”. Farmers in consultation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) designed the card. Farmers can use the Soil quality Card for Georgia to evaluate changes in soil quality on their farm as they are affected by the use of crop residue management and other practices.

The GCTA is a grass-roots movement, where homegrown good ideas, research findings, and information exchange are used to improve and sustain Georgia's agriculture and natural resources. The networking and farmer-to-farmer information exchange is helping to improve our state.