

I want to be sure I don't go backwards. That's that's the first thing I want to be sure. We keep going forwards. And to me, going forward is continue to keep the soil in place.

My name is Clay Hutchens. I farm in Columbia County around the town of Dayton, Washington.

I farm with my wife and some extended family. I'm a fourth generation farmer. My great grandfather started it here in the county, and I'm fortunate enough to be able to try to carry on the legacy that that he started and my grandfather and my father and hopefully future generation will carry on Sunday as well. We're completely rain fed agriculture.

No irrigation, and we farm from elevations of from 1400 feet up to 3500 feet above sea level. What's gotten me interested in involved in soil health, I think starts with the previous generations that were operating the farm. Soil health, in my mind, begins with soil conservation, keeping the keeping the soil in place where it belongs. We farm some steep hillsides up to 55% and water erosion can be a real problem in that type of topography.

So it starts with soil conservation, but continuing throughout that journey. Once we got in direct seeding a little bit deeper, watching the soil change by adding the previous year's crop to the soil, keeping the soil covered with crop residue, acting as an armor for the soil. Both protects from a conservation standpoint from eroding, but it also provides a food system and a fuel system for the for the environment that is the soil life.

The soil biology takes energy to keep everything cycling through, and the more residue, crop residue that we can put into it feeds the system. And we've seen the biology, the biological activity increase. A good a good example of that as earthworms, the amount of tillage that those things that those earthworms do, the benefits that they provide are much better, in my opinion, than anything mechanically that we could do, because they're leaving biological material behind as they help cycle the nutrients.

And and there's so much that we don't understand that goes on in the soil. I'd like to say soil health is really easy to quantify, but it's not you can't really define it, but you know it when you start to see it. And when I walk across our fields and I run the soil through my

fingers, when I stick a shovel into the soil and compare it to some fields that maybe are in a different type of system, you can see changes that are going on within the soil, the way that the soil crumbles in your fingers, the way that the tilth is the color, the way that it smells.

You only see the soil change and you understand that something good things are going on. I've been part of the Columbia Conservation District Board of Supervisors for a little bit north of 20 years now, and I've learned a lot from that board, partly because I was on it with other farmers that were more experienced than me. So some of the most valuable information being on the board was gained in some of our some of our side conversations after the meeting about, Hey, what are you doing on your farm?

You know, what do you think about this? What do you think about that? So there's a there's a really a big networking piece to being involved in community organizations in the conservation District Board is one specifically geared towards towards more towards farming and agriculture. I think that everybody being involved in in some sort of community volunteer program where they have the ability to make some decisions and impact others, I think that's a really important, important place for people to be and it makes them think about something besides just what's right in front of their face every day.

It it makes them think about a broader picture, a broader perspective. And, and and that's okay because if you're exposed to those broader perspectives, you've got a chance to learn. And I think learning is something that should never be taken for granted. If I were to give someone some advice as they start to look at the idea of soil health, I think the first thing I'd tell them is to try to find neighboring farmers around you that are doing some things that you guys can put your heads together and figure out what's working on their farm, what's working on your farm, share some ideas.

What can you do that fits in your current farming system? What options do you have that you can start to to figure out? Maybe this will work here. Start small. Figure out what works in your region. Don't try to copy something from somebody in a completely different, different area. I just like to see more and more conservation farming, more and more farming that that encourages soil health rather than just thinking about it as a as a medium with which to grow a crop.

Thinking about the soil by everybody as a as a living, active being that that is providing healthy crops to help feed the world. Farming

has lots of challenges, but that's what makes it fun. That's what makes it exciting as well. It is always having something to try to figure out. Can it be frustrating? Of course it can be.

But trying to do something better than we've done before is, I think, what keeps me pushing forward because it keeps it fresh, it keeps it new, it keeps it interesting.