

Soil Health Producer Highlights Series

My Farm, My Soil, My Story

Ron & MaryAnn Barnett, Barnett Family Farm—Oyen, AB

* What does “Soil Health” mean to you and why is it important?

Soil Health is important to us. Soil Health on our farm is one of the main elements helping us towards having profitable cropping results with grains, hay and pasture

* What management practices have you used to improve soil health on your operation?

Ron has fenced out numerous grazing fields to rotate stock so controlled grazing occurs. We have dugouts built strategically around the land and with this have also seen an increase in bird populations. We have always liked seeing the trees and brush around sloughs and have never done clearing. This provides outstanding wildlife habitat.

We have used re-grassing cropped/ cultivated fields on a rotation of 6 – 8 years, depending on conditions. Ron has found packing fields with a roller after seeding has improved the seed bed for alfalfa and forage catches. As it turned out the 160 acre field that was in mustard last season (2014) was planted this spring (2015) with alfalfa and seems to be the very best catch ever. Our brother in law, Pat Kuhn and his son Drew, rent our cultivated land and tried to harvest the volunteer mustard but the alfalfa is still growing so much they could only catch the tops of the mustard plants with their reel. Even into October the alfalfa seems to be still growing.

We have used chem-fallow for the last 8 – 10 years and prior to that we used tillage for weed control and moisture preservation. Chem-fallow seems much better in both cases. Diversity in crop rotations (eg. alfalfa, cereals, pulses and oilseeds) has contributed to improved soil condition as well.

* What changes have you seen?

We have seen improved tilth and yields on cropped fields following alfalfa or other forages in the rotation. We have tried varied forage mixes. In August (2015) we were checking our fields and were interested in seeing how a little corner of 4 or 5 acres was producing. It had been native grass and was worked up to square up and combine two fields and was seeded this spring. We could see the line and difference so took a photo and you can clearly see the extra growth and color on the new land. When we stepped on the new area from walking from the old part you could feel the new soil had more of a spongy feel to it and the straw was more flexible as we walked through.

* What are the biggest challenges for soil health in your area?

The biggest challenge we have in this area is retaining and using the moisture we get to the best possible results. That is why we found the Field Day, July 24/15 put on by CARA with Dr. Christine Jones of Australia so interesting. It is amazing how they are bringing back tracts of land to productivity that became desert like from abusive practises. She had powerful slides to help us see what she meant. Dr. Jones gave us an understanding of the fundamentals of soils, as she sees it, and how fertile soil is a function of photosynthesis and microbial re-synthesis and the relationship between healthy soil and the quality and quantity of food it produces.

* How do you advocate for soil health?

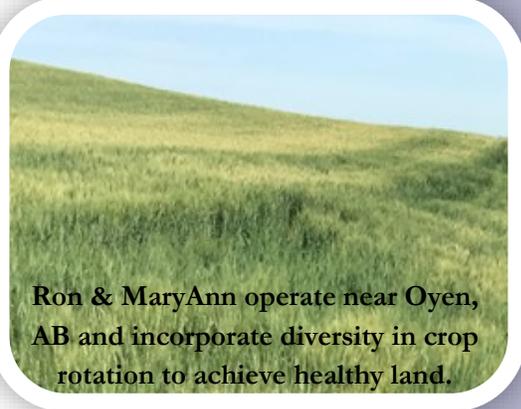
We advocate for soil health mostly by example, but also bring up the importance of looking after the land to almost anyone who is interested – especially to younger people. We feel it is never too late to learn – mixing practical experience with science and research.

* Do you have any future plans for improving the Soil Health on your operation?

The Barnett's are always open to looking at new ideas and Ron reads many publications on farming in general. They participate in programs such as the ones CARA puts on. Planting cocktail cover crops looks very interesting and Ron has taken our nephew, Drew Kuhn, over to the CARA plots at Oyen to observe. Young farmers have to be armed with knowledge so they can draw their own conclusions and decisions. The young farmers have to be able to handle increased pressures and manage the environmental, social and economic issues. Our girls and partners are not farming now but we forward much of the information onto them and discuss with them so they are aware of how we operate and manage our farm. This is part of our Succession Planning.

* How has improving your soil health improved other aspects of your operation?

As much as we may love the land and take pride in looking after it, it comes down to economics. We are seeing profits and consciously want to leave the land in better/ best condition for future generations.



Ron & MaryAnn operate near Oyen, AB and incorporate diversity in crop rotation to achieve healthy land.

The Chinook Applied Research Association (CARA) is a driven by farmers and ranchers in east central Alberta to bring innovative and profitable practices to the local agricultural industry.

