

Doing Good by Doing Well: (Com)passion *and* Financial Skills for Humanity

by Matt Hagny

Howard G. Buffett's high-caliber accomplishments are stand-out, even though his father is far more recognized (Warren Buffett—the legendary investor, and world's second-richest person*). Yet Howard is a driven man, and his achievements are making history: Brilliant examples in the realm of the *business* of no-till farming in the USA's Corn Belt, and in actively developing humanitarian efforts to feed the starving populace in the world's poorest regions, such as parts of Africa. His work there researches better cropping practices and teaches these to the subsistence farmers (barely able to feed themselves, let alone selling any production)—and educates them on rudimentary but essential financial skills to evaluate their enterprise and better manage it.

Howard has been a no-till farmer for 20 years and currently farms 1,280 acres in central Illinois and 400 acres in Nebraska. In addition to farming, Howard is the president of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, which focuses on the linkage between agriculture and food security. The Foundation has 2,400 acres of cropland in central Illinois, 600 acres in Arizona and 9,200 acres in South Africa that are used for research. Howard also has traveled to over 105 countries documenting agricultural practices and the precarious human condition, and he's published several books and articles on the topic. The Foundation strives to make advances in preventing hunger and malnutrition, while conserving resources for the future—especially the soil: The thin veneer over the Earth on which we all depend. (For more on the Foundation's conservation agriculture work and educational campaign, see www.harvestingthepotential.org.)

To Howard, the reasons for no-till cropping on his Illinois farmland are obvious when you look at the numbers. In his own words, he answers, '[Why No-till?](#)' (short video). In another short video clip, he concisely sets forth his longtime stance on no-till: '[Howard Buffett's Farming Crusade.](#)' Additional thoughts from Howard on no-till farming, as well where soil conservation and regulation might be headed in USA can be found in the article '[Soil Savior.](#)'

Howard, as usual, is ahead of the curve with other aspects of agronomy. His rotational diversity includes 200 acres of wheat each year (double-cropped to soybeans after wheat harvest), plus cover crops—which are standard practice for him. Virtually all of his corn stalks are seeded to cover-crop rye each fall, with the drill chasing the combine. The rye is sprayed out in the spring to prepare the seedbed for soybeans. (Cover crops are becoming more obvious all the time as the key to efficient no-till in the Corn Belt, and elsewhere.)



Howard G Buffett

Further reading on Howard's work and worldview: [The Fragile Human Condition, Nov 2009](#)

For more information on the perilous losses of soil productivity, and what no-till can do to stop the degradation, see this article, [Cropland Degradation](#) (Your landlords should read this, too.)

Howard avidly explores new technologies on his successful Decatur, IL farm, perpetually looking for that which will improve his efficiency. Among his technologies that have proven effective, Howard has run Thompson spoked closing wheels on his planter for 8 years. “In wetter conditions, the T-wheels help close up the seed furrow. They help break up the dirt to get better cover over the seed,” he says. And being situated in Illinois, using no-till, he has had plenty of opportunity in recent years to find out what works in mud and what doesn’t. (Again, note that he’s moving into cover crops to address this problem.)

So, invest in your farm’s profitability this year, and invest in the future of humankind. Be resolved in your no-till efforts, and do your problem-solving with that mindset, rather than falling back to tillage when issues arise (there were plenty of unresolved problems in tillage systems, too). The answers aren’t obvious, but those who figure them out will be richly rewarded.

I myself was convinced of the importance of no-till 20 years ago, too, and thereafter worked diligently to escape the social and mental shackles of tillage. Yet I continually re-evaluate data on this. Looking at the topic from an utterly detached viewpoint, and summing up the totality of evidence, what I find is that tillage is in actuality quite a bit worse than we thought (physically dragging the soil down the slope during the tillage operation, for instance), while the advantages of no-till continue to grow with improved knowledge and better tools. Along the way, while working as a crop consultant and farming some acres (and doing lots of no-till custom seeding), I decided that I needed to get involved in improving those tools for no-till seeding, since what was available on the market left quite a bit to be desired. That little side-project 13 years ago became Exapta Solutions.

May your no-till endeavors be prosperous, and your life fulfilling. Salud!
—Kind regards from the crew at Exapta—Brent, Kelly, Rod, and myself.



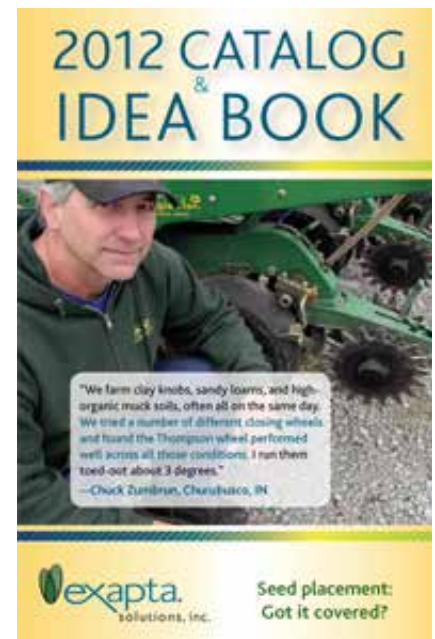
*Ranking reflects that Warren gave much of his wealth to charity, primarily the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—which is having a profound effect in poverty-stricken Africa by bringing the most basic immunizations to the people for a few pennies apiece (truly a revolutionary development), with the result of healthier children having much higher survival rates, which leads directly to smaller family sizes—the previously intractable curse of most of Africa. Source: [Forbes, Nov. 2011 story](#)



Howard G. Buffett is quite pleased with the results from running Exapta’s Thompson closing wheels on his planter for the past 8 years. Howard farms near Decatur, Illinois, using continuous no-till.




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Better tools (and skills) for no-till seeding