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Prairie builder

By TIM WHITE

WITH 16,000 acres to plant and spray this spring, Fred Circle will be one of the busier farmers in the Midwest. Circle specializes in planting warm-season prairie grasses, and with the advent of special conservation programs like the Scioto River Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, his services are in demand.

In the past four years, his company, FDC Enterprises Inc., has planted 40,000 acres of tall prairie grass. Most of the acres get four applications of weed control. He has four 30-foot Sunflower drills operating with GPS steering and two spray units.

"We've been changing the landscape," says Circle, who grew up helping his father at Circle Soil Service in Springfield. "Farmers are particular and proud people, and I just like working with them."

Seeing fields change from flood-damaged bottomland to wildlife-supporting prairies is one of the job's greatest benefits, Circle says. "It goes from being a place with no animals at all to a sea of blowing grasses that is just teeming with wildlife. I didn't grow up in a hunting family, but I love to see all the birds and foxes and deer that are attracted to these areas. It's hard to express

Key Points

- Fred Circle specializes in warm-season grasses.
- He has planted 40,000 acres in the past four years.
- He modified Sunflower drills to handle prairie-grass seed.

the satisfaction you get out of this, but it makes you feel good."

In 1982, Circle formed a weed-management firm that specialized in treating township roadsides. When the Scioto CREP was announced, it became clear there was a need for someone to establish the warm-season grasses required for the program. Circle worked with representatives from Pheasants Forever, as well as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Divisions of Wildlife and Soil and Water.

"I don't know where we'd be without Fred doing what he's doing," says Jim Inglis, field biologist with Pheasants Forever. "Fred stepped up to the plate. He is probably the biggest operator like this in the country."

Planting native warm-season grasses in Ohio presents a special challenge, Inglis says. "Out West, there is little weed pres-

sure; but we get so much more rain in Ohio, it's a challenge."

Special challenge

In the past, establishing the grasses took about three years. "You planted it and ran for cover," Circle says. Even with specialized Truax drills, the seed tended to clump and it took years for the plants to spread. Meanwhile, weeds became established and shaded out the grasses.

Today, Circle has retrofitted his no-till drills to handle a mixture of big bluestem, in-

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Erie Watershed part of EQIP

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GRASS MAN: Fred Circle, speaking at a tour of warm-season grass plantings near Circleville, says his upbringing in agribusiness helps him work with farmers.

diangrass, switchgrass and Canadian wild rye.

"We make five modifications. It enables us to get a consistent seed drop. It gives us an edge. Landowners are particular. When we plant this seed, you can see it row."

Weed control starts with a general residual application. The second and third treatments are usually spot sprays for broadleaf problems. The fourth treatment is usually to target johnsongrass, a perennial problem near the Scioto.

"There is a perception you

can plant these fields and walk away from them for 10 or 15 years," Circle says. "But there are problems in spots. If you invest in a three-point sprayer and hit those spots, it is well worth the effort. There is some concern about bushes coming in, but you can take care of it."

"The best way I've seen to jazz up a stand is to burn it. It's tough because of the restrictions, but it really rejuvenates the plants."

■ For more on warm-season grasses, turn to page 6.

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