

Kevin Knoblach
Split Operation Is a Great Way to Learn as You Go!
Field Grain and Forage Producer
Sauk Center, Minnesota¹



“I wish I would have started sooner,” says Kevin Knoblach, a field crop and forage producer from Sauk Centre, Minnesota. Knoblach transitioned his first 30-acre field in 2008 and currently is transitioning another 20 acres. His remaining 169 acres are what he calls “very conventional.” After farming with man-made inputs for 20 years, Knoblach’s goal now is to become 100 percent certified organic on all land under his management. He expects this will take 8-10 years if he sticks to his strategy of transitioning one field at a time.

Knoblach works full time off the farm as a field rep for Minnesota Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA). His off-farm commitments, more than anything, have motivated his decision to transition gradually. “Organic farming is labor intensive,” explains Knoblach. “I can’t over commit while working for DHIA.”

Transitioning gradually also has allowed Knoblach to learn as he goes. Consequently, he’s been able to develop good rotation, fertility, and weed control strategies.

Knoblach’s five-year organic rotation begins with corn followed by small grain underseeded with alfalfa, then 2-3 years of alfalfa. “We apply liquid manure annually to all organic fields,” says Knoblach. “For weeds, we flame and then cultivate three times. We also hand pull the rag weed.” Knoblach’s conventional rotation includes corn, soybeans, and some alfalfa.

With good fertility in place and weeds under control, Knoblach’s organic yields regularly average 80 percent of his conventional yields. Organic corn yields, for example, average 115 bushels/acre compared to 150 bushels/acre on his conventional ground. All of Knoblach’s fields are clay-loam with “lots of tile.”

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Knoblach owns roughly half of his total farmed acreage and rents the remainder on a long-term lease from his uncle. Land rents in his area average approximately \$300/acre. He hopes to double the amount of land that he farms over time.

When asked what gave him the confidence to go organic, Knoblach, like other organic farmers, says that it all began with a conversation. "I started talking to one of the organic farmers that I did DHIA testing for," explains Knoblach. "I asked a lot of questions and thought organic just might be a good way to be competitive on a small scale." But, he didn't just take the other farmer's word for it. Knoblach spent the next five years attending organic conferences and field days where he would talk with dozens of farmers, buyers, and certifiers before making the final decision to transition.

Today, Knoblach still attends the Minnesota Organic Conference every year where he visits with other growers and arranges for the sale of approximately 70 percent of his certified and transitional field crops on forward contract with buyers who attend the trade show. He has been able to secure a transition premium for some crops.

Organic forage is marketed direct to dairy farmers in his area. Knoblach also has a good arrangement with neighbors who harvest and chop all alfalfa straight out of the field - reducing his need for some equipment.

Knoblach recommends that other farmers do some "homework" before making the transition. But, he cautions, **"Don't spend five years kicking it around. You don't have to go 100 percent organic right away. Just give it a try on a few acres and see how it goes."**