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GOT IT COVERED: "Our cover crop project is unique in several ways," says Sarah Carlson. "Not only is it a new partnership between ILF and PFI, but the in-field research approach is different from traditional studies."



Group promotes cover crop use

By CAROL BROWN

Key Points

- New Cover Crop Working Group formed to encourage use of cover crops in Iowa.
- Field demos show differences between cover and no cover crop.
- Goal is to show cover crops' ability to improve soil quality and reduce erosion.

INTEREST in cover crops continues to grow in Iowa. More farmers are considering using them after last year's flooding as a way to maintain precious topsoil. But saving soil is only one benefit of having cover crops on a field.

A working group was recently formed between the Iowa Learning Farm program and the Practical Farmers of Iowa organization to conduct on-farm demonstrations of cover crop use. They'll show the benefits cover crops bring to the field to improve soil and water quality in addition to erosion reduction.

Other goals are to demonstrate successful establishment and management, to address the challenges of establishing and producing cover crops, and to find ways to overcome these challenges.

The Cover Crop Working Group, funded by a district initiative grant through the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Division of Soil Conservation, or IDALS, is hoping to continue the study for five years. The group has an advisory panel of ILF team members, PFI staff, and representatives from IDALS, USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, National Soil Tilth Lab and farmers who've been using cover crops for a number of years.

The farmer cooperators that are involved with this project are ILF cooperators and PFI members. Some have been using cover crops for a while and some are new to the cover crop scene. The farmer-cooperators are in Adair, Shelby, Carroll, Greene, Grundy and Bremer counties. More cooperators will be added in the future to gain representation in all of Iowa's main soil regions.

The project is unique in several ways. "Not only is this a new partnership between ILF and PFI, but the in-field research approach is different from traditional research," says Sarah Carlson, program specialist with PFI. "Traditional research plots have studied the cover crop in a test site for a short time, maybe one or two years and then study it in another area of the field. This new project will focus on five years of repeated side-by-side cover-crop/no-cover-crop demonstrations in the same field."

Cover crop biomass production and cash crop yield will be sampled every year of the project in the cover and no-cover plots. Baseline measurements of bulk density, total soil carbon, nitrogen, organic matter, pH and microbial biomass will be taken at the start of the project. The same measurements will be collected at the sites after five years in the same field to determine any improvement in the soil quality indicators.

Another aspect of the project will be to explore timelines for planting and killing cover crops, says Carlson. The more cover crop biomass produced in the fall and spring, the more benefits the soil receives. Traditionally, a cover crop is planted postharvest and then killed in the spring, prior to planting the next year's crop. This can reduce the potential for good cover crop growth.

Increase cover crop acreage

Some cooperators will experiment with seeding cover crops prior to fall harvest, either by aerial seeding or using modified high-clearance sprayers or detasseling machines. In spring they'll also try to plant into living cover followed by herbicide treatment.

The group will share results with farmers, researchers, ISU Extension and agency personnel to increase awareness of cover crops' impact on soil quality. They'll share their knowledge and results through the media, events such as field days, and one-on-one education. The ultimate goal is to have increased acres of cover crops in Iowa.

For information about the Cover Crop Working Group, contact Carlson at 515-232-5661 or e-mail sarah@practicalfarmers.org. For Iowa Learning Farm, visit www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf.

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