

Covers can offer grazing, forage

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ACROSS the state, cover crops are greening up the fields as harvest continues. The beautiful greening landscape is providing benefits to landowners, producers and downstream residents through reduced soil erosion, improved soil health and decreased nitrate loss. However, another benefit is growing in popularity: the ability to graze or forage those cover crop acres.

Grazing cover crops is one of the fastest ways to measure a return to adding cover crops. Come spring, overwintering species of cover crops will green up to expand available grazing acres and provide early-season rest for pastures. This added value is especially important for producers with limited acres who want to extend their grazing season and lower feed costs without taking land out of row crop production.

Another benefit of grazing cover crops is direct deposit of manure. Grazing the cover crops in the field eliminates the need to transport manure off-site. Instead, the nutrients are cycled through the grazing animal and deposited directly onto the field without additional machinery or labor costs.

Getting started

Successfully grazing cover crops requires planning and management. To optimize

returns on grazing cover crops, pay attention to spring biomass growth to determine stocking rates. Using rotational or strip grazing and reading herbicide labels for grazing restrictions are other steps you need to take.

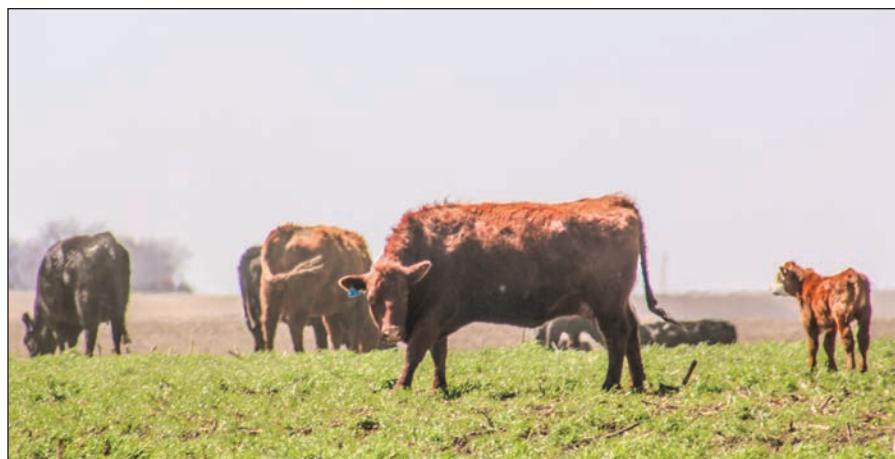
Together, Iowa Learning Farms, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and the Iowa Beef Center have created new publications, freely available online and by request, to help identify best management practices for grazing cover crops. Visit the link at the end of this article for information on how to access these resources.

Fall-seeded cereal grains such as rye, wheat and triticale grow quickly and produce good dry matter yield for spring grazing before the cool-season grasses begin to grow. Cereal rye is first to begin growing in the spring when temperatures reach 38 degrees F. Although wheat grows slower in early spring, it can produce more biomass if allowed to grow longer. They can be grazed as soon as the forage reaches 6 to 8 inches. Pull the livestock when about 4 inches of plant height remains.

Concerned about compaction?

Don't let soil compaction concerns keep you from grazing cover crops in the spring. Avoiding compaction during spring cover crop grazing is easy by following a few best-management practices:

- Do not graze cover crops during wet



GOOD GRAZING, GOOD ADVICE: Grazing is one of the fastest ways to get a return on investment with a cover crop. But successfully grazing cover crops requires planning and management.

and muddy conditions; dry or frozen soils are ideal.

- Do not create areas that could cause concentrated hoof traffic; vary the location of supplemental feeding or the water source, and limit access to areas that are likely to compact.

- Use a rotational grazing plan to adjust where and how long livestock graze in an area.

- Have a backup plan for where livestock should go during poor field conditions.

Two case studies, summarized in the second installment in our grazing publication series, evaluated the impacts of grazing cornstalk residue with and without cover crops.

The results showed little to no effect on the following soybean and corn yields, even when increases in soil compaction were measured.

The root structure of grazed cover crops can actually reduce existing soil compaction in a field. When grazed, cover crop roots secrete root exudates, which encourage additional root growth. As roots grow deeper, they break up com-

paction and deposit organic matter deep into the soil. Cover crops can also protect the upper layer of soil from the effects of trampling.

Foraging an option

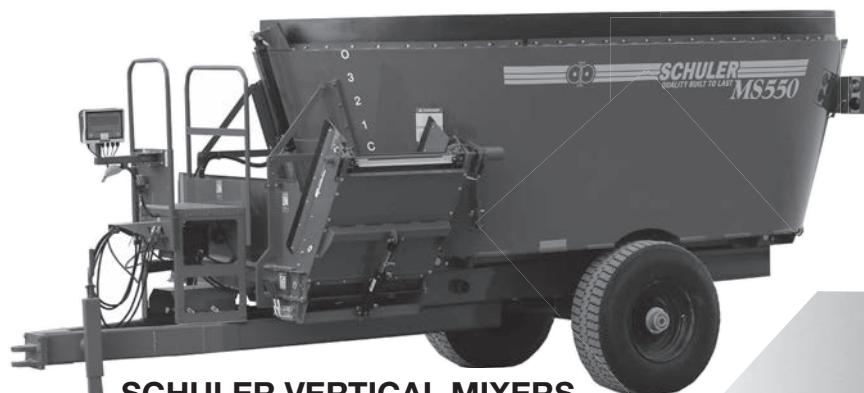
Cover crops can be mechanically harvested in the spring for use as forage feedstock. For winter cereals, harvest at boot stage of growth to optimize forage quality. Spring cover crops can be harvested for haylage, baleage or silage depending on your operation and the weather.

Neither grazing nor harvesting forage will impact crop insurance, as long as the cover crop is still fully terminated before planting, adequate biomass is left in place and the cover crop is not harvested for grain.

For more information, see our two grazing cover crop publications: "Spring Grazing Cover Crops" and "Grazing Cover Crops to Avoid Compaction" on our website, iowalearningfarms.org/content/cover-crop-resources.

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