

The cover crop believer

By DICK TREMAIN

SEEING is believing, and southwest Iowan Paul Ackley says the cover crops he planted last fall protected his soil from the ravages of flooding this spring.

“Cover crops produce plant residue that reduces the impact of raindrops on soil, and the fibrous roots hold soil in place. The heavy rains on my fields proved cover crops can save soil,” says the Taylor County farmer.

“When we plant a rye cover crop in the fall,” says Ackley, “we can turn cows in the field, and they’ll have fresh feed when nothing else is green. It’s a protein source that can take abuse. Cattle can graze it down, and it’ll grow back to give fields erosion protection in the spring.”

Key Points

- Farmer credits cover crop with protecting soil from erosion during heavy rains.
- Extensive root structure of ryegrass cover crop holds soil in place in fields.
- It works well to seed a rye cover after corn harvest in a corn-bean rotation.

Cover crops offer many benefits besides controlling erosion. He says biologically, cover crops are a third crop in a corn-soybean rotation. Research shows a third crop can reduce insect pressure on row crops and perhaps boost yields. Cover crops also reduce field compaction, add organic matter to soil and can be used as cattle feed.

Doug Davenport, district conservationist with USDA’s NRCS, calls Ackley an innovator. “Paul’s learning all the time, always involved in locally led conservation planning,” says Davenport. “He’s genuinely interested in preserving his soil resource.”

Farming 40 years in Taylor County near Bedford, Ackley and his wife own 750 acres and rent 350. They plant 500 acres of row crops in a corn-soybean rotation. They have a 100-head cow herd. Other conservation practices Ackley uses are terraces, filter strips, riparian buffers, shallow-water wetlands, rotational grazing and erosion control structures. Crops are no-tilled.

BUILDS TILTH: Paul Ackley likes the long-lasting ability of rye roots to hold soil in place and improve soil tilth. He prefers to plant rye after corn harvest in a corn-bean rotation.

Ackley added cover crops to his conservation practices to help address erosion concerns. After 20 years of trying, he has figured out the right corn stubble and cover crop combination.

He mixes ryegrass seed with phosphorus and potash and broadcasts the mixture right after harvest in the fall. Ryegrass seed takes root, grows, and protects fields from erosion soon after harvest and into the summer.

“Cover crops need to be inexpensive to produce,” he says, “and not cause any problems. For me, rye is an economical part of the solution. I get my money back with cover crops.”

Counting on cover crops

Ackley can plant a rye cover crop to harvested cornfields for \$11 an acre. He applies 1 bushel of seed per acre, mixing rye seed with phosphorus and potash, and broadcasts the mix.

Seeding a cover crop into a soybean field is trickier. The cover crop seed has to be applied before leaf drop and must be the right seed combination. The mix must be cheap. Ackley uses turnip, sweetclover and oats. It costs just \$24 an acre, including aerial seeding.



“All my fields can benefit from cover crops,” he says. “I plan to seed all our cornfields and some soybean acres in cover crop this fall. I want our soil to stay where it belongs — on the hill where it can do some good, not down along the fence.”

“Before using cover crops, even with no-till, sometimes I’d see erosion on the hillier land,” notes Ackley. “You figure how many tons of soil you’re losing, and it makes you sick. Soil is valuable. It’s always the good dirt that goes. You lose humus, fertilizer and organic matter.”

Benefits of cover crops

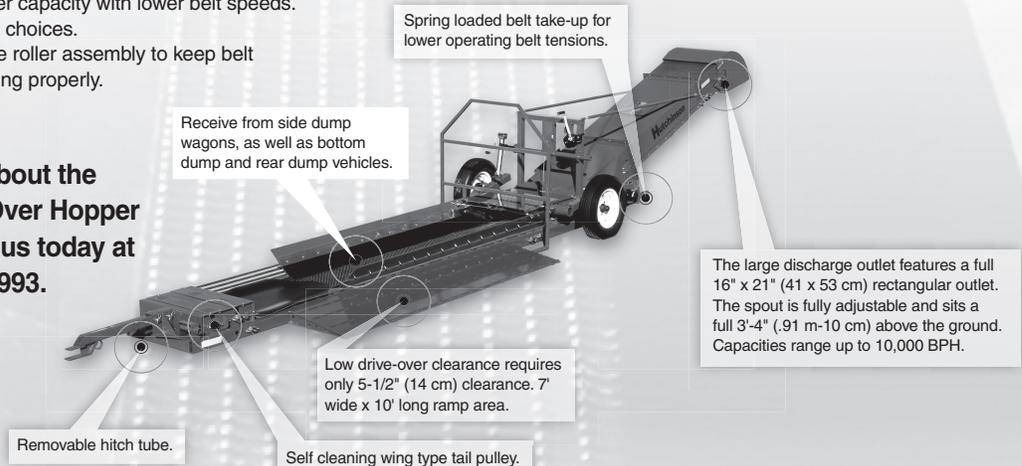
1. Prevent soil erosion, can improve yields.
2. Provide rotational benefit by adding another crop.
3. Add organic matter, boost soil microbial activity.
4. Reduce compaction, improve water infiltration.
5. Root structure binds soil long after cover crop is dead.
6. Cattle can graze cover crops in winter and spring.

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