Halifax SWCD Newsletter

Fall 2017

We work with the people who work the land.

Cover Crops Gaining Use

Farmers Planting More Acres For Soil Health, Weed Management, and Yield

By Chris Clayton

***Progressive Farmer* 9/15/17**

OMAHA (DTN) -- The latest survey on cover crop use shows more farmers are using cover crops on a larger set of acreage, and those farmers using cover crops state they have a variety of benefits.

The latest cover crop survey, done for the fifth consecutive year, was done by the Conservation Technology Information Center with help from Purdue University and funding from the American Seed Trade Association and USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE).

"Cover crops are becoming a broader, mainstream practice," said Chad Watts, executive director of the Conservation Technology Information Center.

The survey received results back from 2,102 farmers, of which 88% used cover crops while 12% of the respondents did not. The survey received responses from around the country with the largest concentration of responses coming from the Midwest and northern Corn Belt. About 80% of the farmers who participated are commodity producers, while 20% are involved in some form of horticulture or produce production.

The survey showed about a 50-acre bump in cover crops per farm over the past year, based on the respondents to the study. The average volume of cover-crop acres has steadily risen from 217 five years ago to 451 acres in 2017, "We're seeing a lot of interest in cover crops, we're seeing a lot of expansion in the number of acres per person who responded every year in cover crops," Watts said.

The study also showed a diverse mix of farmers planting cover crops, based on crops, tillage system, farm size and length of time the farmer has used covers.

The report stated cereal rye was the most popular cover crop, followed by oats and radishes. About 65% of cover-crop users stated they planted some form of cover-crop mix last year.

Respondents stated soil health is a key benefit for 86% of those using cover crops. Improved yield was also cited as a benefit. The report highlighted that small yield gains were seen again in corn and soybeans for producers following cover crops. Corn producers saw a 2.3-bushel-per-acre bump, and soybeans saw a 2.1-bpa increase following covers. Wheat farmers also reported a 2-bpa increase in yield.

Just under one-quarter of the farmers surveyed have at least 81% of their farm planted in cover crops during at least some part of the year. Another 26% of respondents have anywhere from 41% to 80% of their farms planted to cover crops.

Questions got more detailed on topics such as "planting green," meaning farmers drilled their cash crops into a standing cover crop. The survey showed 39% had done so. Of that group, 61% of those farmers who planted into a standing cover crop considered their weed control had improved. Just 8% stated that weed control was more challenging with that practice.

Another 25% said cover crops always help improve control of herbicide-resistant weeds for those farmers that use cereal rye as a cover. An additional 44% said they sometimes saw benefits controlling herbicide-resistant weeds. About 31% said they saw no benefit from that practice. And, yet, among farmers who do not use cover crops, another 42% of respondents said one reason they don't use cover crops is their concern over the possible spread of resistant weeds.

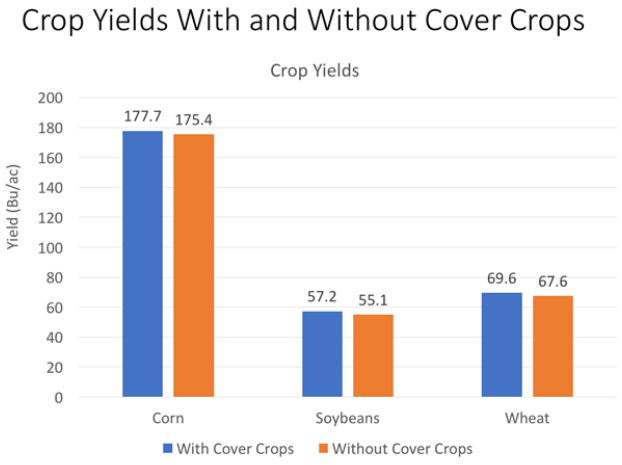
Planting green also helps with soil moisture management, according to 62% of farmers who responded to the question. Meanwhile, 11% of those who responded said the practice dries out soil too often.

Crop insurance is often considered a barrier to planting cover crops, but the survey response did not bear that out. About 18% of respondents said it was their perception that crop insurance was a reason farmers do not plant covers.

Regarding advice, farmers who responded stated that beginners should start small, learn and build from there. They also recommended beginners experiment to determine what works, while being patient and waiting for benefits. Along with that, farmers should seek the advice of an experienced cover-crop user or crop adviser, survey respondents said.

For those farmers who do not use covers, expense is a concern for now, especially with largely stagnant commodity prices. The main concern with cover crops, however, remains time management and labor concerns. Another major concern, however, was that farmers who do not use covers do not see an economic return from planting them.

The full survey can be viewed at www.ctic.purdue.edu.



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Precision Ag for Crops - Opportunity - Free to producers

By Kimley Blanks, Agricultural Marketing Director

Producers in six counties (Halifax, Pittsylvania, Mecklenburg, Patrick, Henry, and Franklin) have an opportunity to have an AgBOT (drone) to fly over their farm through a grant opportunity with the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research (IALR) in Danville. Currently, this program is for crops only but anticipate that pastures will be included in the future. This opportunity is free for producers and you do not need to purchase anything in order to participate. There is no deadline at this time to apply but would encourage producers to submit their application in order to get a slot on the calendar with the technician.

A technician from IALR will come out to your farm on a day and time that is agreed upon by the farmer – hopefully you will be in attendance to watch the drone in action. The technician will fly the drone over the selected acreage, and will return about 2 more times to fly over the same acres in order to collect data over a period of time. The technician will analyze the data and review the information with the farmer.

The benefits of participating include an overall composite view of their crops progression and health throughout the growing season so that, going into the subsequent season they can target resources, time, and monetary investments (such as the use of pricey agro-chemicals, irrigation, labor) to areas of their fields that are the most in need.

The statement most associated with this program is "Maximizing outputs while minimizing input" - access to this type sophisticated data is given directly to the grower and hopefully encourage growers incorporate precision agriculture techniques into their established cultivation practices.

There is a one-page application and a handout regarding the program at www.genuinehalifax.com.

Please contact me know if you have any questions at 434-476-3300 ext. 3331 or you can contact Samantha Smith-Herndon, AgBOT Technician at IALR, directly at 434-766-6622.

Halifax SWCD Offering Haybuster No-till Drill on Sealed Bid

Halifax SWCD is offering up it's 2013 Haybuster 107C no-till drill for sealed bid starting November 23, 2017. Bids will be taken through November 3, 2017 and be opened on November 9, 2017 at the Halifax SWCD board meeting. Below is a brief description of the drill.

Year: 2013
Make: Haybuster
Model: 107C
Planting Width: 10'6"
Acreage: 4701.9
Row Spacing: 7"
Coulter Type: Double Disc Opener

Coulter and bearings replaced at 4076 acres. New front tire. New drive wheel assembly. Dolly wheel assembly replaced in 2016. Hydraulic cylinder replaced in 2016.

For more information please contact Halifax SWCD at 434-476-7923. More pictures can be found online at www.halifaxswcd.org.

Sign Up Now for 2018 Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Halifax, September 12, 2017— Virginia farmers and forest landowners can now apply for assistance to protect the health and productivity of their land under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

This popular 2014 Farm Bill program offers technical and financial assistance to plan and install conservation practices on cropland, pastureland, and non-industrial private forestland. NRCS accepts applications year-round but makes funding selections at specific times. For Fiscal Year 2018, Virginia NRCS has established two application-batching periods:

Application Batching Period	Application Deadline	Batching Deadline
1	October 20th, 2017	November 17th, 2017
2	January 19th, 2018	February 16th, 2018

To be considered for a given Application Batching Period, an applicant MUST submit a signed and dated *Conservation Program Application* to the local NRCS service center by close of business on the application deadline. NRCS will not accept applications from individuals/entities without farm records established through USDA's Farm Service Agency. The name, tax identification number, and address provided must also match IRS income tax records.

At least five percent of EQIP funding will be allocated to socially disadvantaged and new and beginning farmers who will be eligible for a higher payment rate along with limited resource producers. Veteran farmers who are also new or beginning farmers also receive the higher payment rate and will be funded first.

At least sixty percent of available FY18 funds will be allocated to livestock-related resource concerns and a minimum of five percent will be committed for wildlife concerns.

Special EQIP fund pools will also be available to offer technical and financial assistance for the following focal areas as well as a number of landscape based initiatives:

Cropland – Practices to enhance water and soil quality while improving plant health and productivity;

High Tunnel (Hoop House) – Steel-framed, polyethylene-covered structures to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner;

Northern Bobwhite in Working Grasslands – Native grass restoration to address habitat loss while maintaining or improving cattle production on the land;

On-Farm Energy – Agricultural Energy Management Plans (AgEMP) or farm energy audits to assess energy use and recommend ways to reduce it;

Organic – Practices to help certified organic growers, those working to achieve organic certification, and specialty crop producers address resource concerns on their operations.

Applicants must meet USDA program eligibility requirements to be considered for funding. Those approved for financial assistance will receive a payment based on an NRCS determination of incurred costs and income sacrificed for practice implementation. If you previously applied for EQIP and were not funded, contact your local NRCS Service Center for more information.

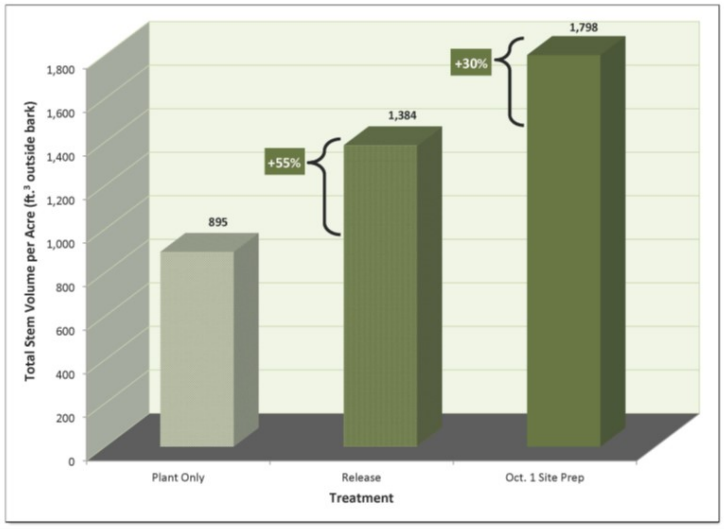
Call or visit your local NRCS office to learn more about how EQIP and other Farm Bill programs can help you better protect and manage natural resources on your land. Visit http://offices.usda.gov for USDA service center locations. General program information is available on the NRCS Virginia website at www.va.nrcs.usda.gov.

Harvesting Timber and Growing Pines (part 2)

In part one of this article, I discussed the reasons of cutting trees as a crop and where knowledgeable advice about planting it back into pines can be found. To continue the learning process about growing pines as an investment, I now will explain more about site index and its effect on pine growth; pine genetics; possible site preparation options; how it all fits into your objectives as a landowner, and how the site preparation activities influence pine growth.

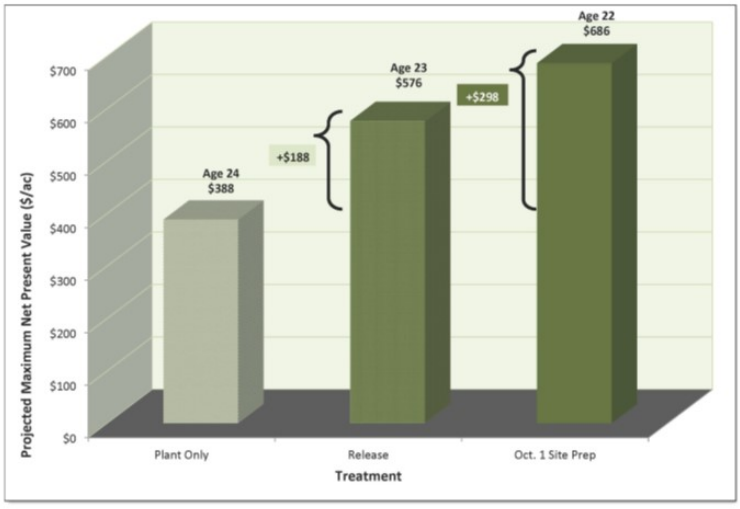
Site index (SI) is the measure of soil productivity, or, more simply stated, "how tall a pine tree can grow in a set number of years" when growing in a certain type of dirt. For pine, that time frame is usually 25 years. The higher the number of SI means the taller the pine can grow in the set time frame. The taller the tree can mean more tree volume or greater the potential for wood production.

The Virginia Department of Forestry nursery grows several types of genetically improved loblolly pine. The genetic progression has included: 1st generation; 2nd generation, and 3rd generation, which includes elite, premium, Virginia's Best and control pollinated seedlings. The better the genetics you select, the more the pine seedlings cost. But with that higher investment comes an increase in production.



In the 1980s, '90s and early 2000s, our genetics and recommendations were able to produce approximately three tons per acre/year. With the improved genetics of our research people and state nurseries, we are now capable of getting upwards of five to six tons per acre/year and, under certain conditions, even as much as seven tons per acre/year. This has enabled us to grow pine faster. This has allowed for shorter rotations which can provide more frequent harvests.

***** See Figures 1 and 2



These shorter harvest rotations also mean a shorter time to carry any financial costs for planting before having the opportunity to recoup those expenses. It is understood that this type of fast-growing pine is not conducive for 2x4s for building, but is perfect for OSB/plywood as well as any paper products that might be produced or wood chips for energy plants and wood pellets.

Next, it is important to know if the timber cut was all hardwoods; a mix of hardwood and pine, or all pine. Knowing the time of year it was cut and your objectives for the property will help determine what type of site preparation for the harvested site will be needed. For example, an area that was pine and is being planted in pine will probably require the site be left for a year and then chemically sprayed with herbicide to control hardwood regeneration and any natural pine regeneration.

Other options of site preparation may include a prescribed burn and then plant, or possibly light bulldozer use to windrow the slash and then plant. Lastly, planting directly after a harvest and then spraying herbicide after a couple years of pine seedling growth to control hardwood competition is also an option. This option can be done if hardwood timber was cut.

If it is determined you have good soil productivity, or the SI for pine is high and your objective is to grow pines as an investment or quality crop, then take the time to use the correct site preparation method and best genetics you can.

Below are two simple bar graphs with possible costs and revenues from planting pines and volumes depending on what site preparation method is used. This information is from data collected off research plots on state forests and compiled by VDOF research forester.

It is this type of information that is important for landowners to better understand as they make planting decisions on harvested areas that will also financially impact them. If you have questions, then you are helping yourself become better educated to make the right decisions for you and your property. Please contact your VDOF forester, Trevor Simmons in North Halifax or Tom Burke in South Halifax at 434-476-6372 or a consulting forester in your area for additional information.

Halifax Ag Breakfast Series Meeting Schedule for Winter 2017-2018

Halifax, VA (November 1, 2017) – The Agriculture Agencies of Halifax County announce the second annual Ag Breakfast Series for producers. This year's topics include Nov. 14th – Cattle Performance & Winter Feeding Strategies, Dec. 12th – Business Strategies and Financial Management, Jan. 16th – Pasture Weed Control and Forestry, Feb. 13th – Row Crop Production, and Mar. 13th – Soil Health and Grazing Annuals.

The Ag Breakfast Series seeks to bring in experts while addressing producer needs and issues facing their operation. Each month, the 1-2-hour morning event over a free breakfast focuses on topics for producers as well as an outlook looking into the new year and season.

The programs will begin with breakfast at 9 AM and will be held at the Ag Marketing Center in Scottsburg. There is no cost to attend, but registration is required by the Friday before each breakfast meeting. Please contact the Halifax SWCD office at 434-476-7923 to register.

The Ag Breakfast Series is a partnership between VCE, SWCD, NRCS, and Agriculture Development.

Upcoming Events:

November 3—Low-Energy Cattle Handling Workshop-Wirtz, VA
November 9—Board Meeting
November 14—Ag Breakfast Series, 9-11 am (Livestock)
December 6—SOVA Ag Tourism Workshop
December 12—Ag Breakfast Series, 9-11 am (Business Management)
December 14—Board Meeting
January 9—Ag Breakfast Series, 9-11 am (Weed Control)
January 11—Board Meeting

Board of Directors:
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Staff:
Rick Brown—Conservation Specialist
Janice Jackson—Administrative/
Technical Assistant
Melissa Waller—Education & Outreach Specialist

Halifax SWCD Welcomes Melissa Waller as Education and Outreach Specialist

Melissa Waller went to Averett University receiving her degree in Biology concentrating in Ecology and Environmental Science. Melissa grew up on a Dairy Farm where she developed her passion for Agriculture early in life. She was involved in FFA and 4H growing up. In high school Melissa started helping with Best Management Practices on the farm, attended Conservation Camp at Virginia Tech and took an Environmental Science course which led her to strive to have a career in conservation. Melissa has worked as an Agriculture Technician for Virginia Cooperative Extension in Franklin County where she helped local farmers and landowners with agriculture questions, helped coordinate Master Gardeners, worked to improve the local food market, conducted Save Our Streams Monitoring, and planned programs to educate the community about agriculture and natural resources. Melissa has also worked for the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research where she conducted research on Arundo Donax to be used as biofuel. Melissa resides in Pittsylvania county with her husband, Travis and daughters Alaina and Emily. "I am excited to join Halifax SWCD, I know that coordinating with different organizatons in the county for more education and awareness for conservation practices will be very rewarding."

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