

University of Idaho Extension continues important cover crop research

AT A GLANCE

Cover crop use is growing in southern Idaho and University of Idaho Extension educators have partnered with growers to help answer questions of production and use.

The Situation

Cover crop use is an area of expanding production throughout southern Idaho. While considered novel only a few years ago, the use of cover crops has expanded in the region, for a variety of reasons.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has encouraged growing cover crops from the aspect of soil health and to reduce wind erosion along the Snake River Plain. While these uses are encouraged and noble, growers are looking for financially viable ways to use cover crops. There are real costs to planting cover crops and finding immediate economic returns will be necessary to encourage more growers to use them.

Extension educators have had inquiries from growers who desire to use cover crops for grazing in different situations. Some want to rotate them in as an annual crop, some want to plant them after grain harvest for winter feed, and others are looking at interseeding approaches so the cover crops can grow along with the cash crop making them available for grazing shortly after harvest.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension educators have conducted previous work of seeding cover crops after cereal grains are harvested. The results of that work are available in previous Impact Statements.



Multi-species cover crops interseeded into standing corn silage crop in mid July. The cover crop will provide forage after harvest.

Extension educators were contacted by two separate growers in the spring of 2017 for help in conducting trials with cover crops geared towards grazing.

One producer lives in an area where crop rotation is severely limited by climate. The producer's goals are to plant cover crops in the annual rotation using rent income from grazing, and reduce commercial fertilizer inputs in the following season's barley crops to improve marginal soils. The grower received a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension producer grant to conduct the work and several Extension educators serve as technical advisors on this ongoing project.

The second producer is looking for ways to increase forage available for cattle feed following corn silage harvest. The grower wanted to know how interseeding cover crop into growing corn might work for their operation. The concept is not new to Idaho but

it hasn't been replicated enough to give sound consulting advice. Extension educators designed a study on the farm to determine feasibility and proper seeding times during the growing season.

Program Outcomes

Both of these projects are ongoing and will run another production season. Future Impact Statements and publications will provide more detailed information. Data from the first year appears to suggest there is an optimum time to plant cover crops in standing corn to maximize corn silage production, and for ready grazing after the corn is cut. It also appears that annual cereals can be used with cover crop species in an intensive grazing situation with grazing available from June-November.

Growers are interested in cover crop research and University of Idaho Extension is on the front line of this important work in the western states. University of Idaho Extension is finding ways to help growers adopt cover crop production and meet economic goals. Private industry agronomists are also interested, watching for the results of various Extension cover crop projects.

Extension educators now receive several inquiries a year about which species to include, how and when to plant, how to calibrate drills and applications for grazing. Extension educators have published University of Idaho Extension Bulletin 901 "Cover Crops for Grazing Use in Idaho," and are currently collaborating with NRCS staff and producers to develop feasible practices. In the Magic Valley, this collaboration has led to the formation of the Magic Valley Soil Health Forum, a group that meets monthly during the winter to discuss soil health and cover crop topics.

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