CAN I ADOPT COVER CROPS

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First, understand your soil

Then you will better understand how cover crops fit your operation
How a cover crops fits depends on your management objective

- Moisture capture and retention
- Wind protection
- Basic forage
- Maximum forage
- Spring forage
- Increase soil N
- Nematicides
- Soil health
- No-till conversion
Improper management of the cover crop can overshadow its benefits!

Must be managed like any other crop
Consider YOUR objective

- There is no prescription one-size-fits-all cover crop program
- You must put the pencil to paper and figure the financials
  - Will you need additional equipment?
  - Seed cost
  - Opportunity costs
  - Real cost of equipment (fuel, labor, depreciation, insurance, storage)
  - Additional fertilizer inputs?
  - Irrigation costs (labor, pumping)
  - Value of forage produced
  - Fertility value of green manure plow down
Lessons learned from Producers

• Cut costs, not income-Highest yield may not mean highest return
• Start small--small grains, corn, legumes
• Rotations (biological diversity) are key
• It takes time-4+ years, not a quick fix
• There are no cookbook recipes
• At first, some chemicals may be needed
  – Consideration for farms going completely no-till with cover crop incorporation-especially moving toward organic
Some things learned or observed

• We have far more questions than answers
• Seed mixes can get expensive rather quickly
• Perennial legumes are too expensive, and of little use, if you can’t keep them in for several months
  – summer fallow, no-till application, companion plant, strip till
• Must have irrigation for establishment
• Proper planting time & technique is critical-calibration is too!
• Worms and microbes in the soil, help determine success
• What is below the soil is as important as what’s above
• Grazers help to complete the system
Some things we don’t know

• How much organic matter will be added to the soil?
• How long will organic matter remain?
• How much N will be added?
• When will the N be available?
• If you use cover crops with beets and potatoes in rotation, do you in one year undo all the good?
• How do cover crops affect the succeeding crop?
• Herbicide carry over for cover crop or grazing animals—this information can be found on THE LABEL!
Some tough issues

- Green bridges and disease carry over
- Soil dry down and warm up in the spring
- Voles!!