Cover Crop Opportunities

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After experiencing the wettest spring ever, and getting nearly 8 inches of rain in 36 hours to set a new July record, what are you going to do with those acres that didn't get planted?

Hopefully, you have good insurance, but now is the time to look at some other options.

In visiting with Illinois FSA staff, it looks like those acres can be planted in cover crops. Why? Cover crops reduce the weed problem, don't require mowing, conserve and improve the soil, maintain residue cover for compliance, and add some nitrogen for next year. This could also be an opportunity to do some conservation practices, tiling and drainage improvements.

If you intend to plant a cover crop, here are three general guidelines to stay in compliance.

NO program crops can be used, AND no horticulture or vegetable crops can be planted. That means no corn, soybeans, wheat or grain sorghum can be used.

Before you plant, you must make a request to your local FSA office to plant a cover crop, and get approval from the county committee. You must also submit a statement that you will not harvest the cover crop.

To be safe, you may want to check with your insurance company as well.

What to plant? If nitrogen is needed for a corn crop next year, consider hairy vetch, crimson clover or Persian clover. Each one has advantages and disadvantages.

If you choose vetch, remember the nitrogen levels depend on the amount of top growth, and planting into tall, vine-like green vetch is a challenge if you have never done it before.

Crimson and Persian clovers no-till easily and are not difficult to control, unlike red clover. Several farmers are planning to mix legumes with annual ryegrass to help store some of the nitrogen in case it winter kills. Cereal rye at 30 to 40 pounds per acre would also work. If you are planting soybeans next year, consider cereal rye or annual ryegrass. Spring oats will work and will winter kill, but check with FSA first.

What are the economics? Planted this early, hairy vetch at 12 pounds per acre, crimson clover at 12 pounds per acre, or Persian clover at 8 pounds per acre would keep the cost below $15 per acre. The benefits could be significant. This year, plot results produced up to 180 pounds of nitrogen per acre by May 12.

You can see these results and other information on our new website: http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/carbondalecenter . Δ

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