

No-Till Notes:

Cover Crops

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We haven't done anything with cover crops on our farm, and I think this has been a mistake. I have heard about the benefits of cover crops for many years now, but always felt they may not fit in our semi-arid environment. Some questions we have always had is where do they fit in our environment, how can we sacrifice the moisture to produce them, and what type of cover crops will work best for us?

Our light bulb is finally starting to burn a little brighter now and we are starting to understand the concept of producing cover crops and the benefits they will provide to our farming operation in terms of soil health. The biggest mistake we have made in our no till farming career is not paying enough attention to the soil and how we have managed this important component of our farming operation. Throughout our farming career our soil management has consisted of probing the soil to see how much fertilizer to apply to produce the crop we intended to grow. This was a mistake. We are now looking at putting some cover crops into our rotation and are starting to answer some of the questions we have about cover crops.

We have decided the place for cover crops is in our winter wheat stubble following wheat harvest. There is a lengthy fallow period from the time our wheat crop is done using moisture until we plant the following proso millet or corn crop, a period of 10 months. Having taken a close look at this fallow period we have determined we average 9.37 inches of precipitation during this time. Our soils are capable of storing from 4-6 inches of moisture so we have determined there is enough rainfall to produce a cover crop and still have a soil profile reasonably full when we plant the following crop. We feel the benefits to the soil by producing a cover crop will more than outweigh any shortage of moisture we may have at planting if the spring turns out to be dry. We are very interested to see how the use of cover crops enhances our farming operation and what the benefits will be. We feel this is the next step in cropping intensity we can take to increase our overall crop productivity in our farming operation.

The next decision is what to grow to benefit our operation. We have talked to a neighbor who would like to graze the cover crops with his cattle in the fall. We are looking at a mixture of cover crops to improve the overall health of our soil and provide good grazing for the neighbor's cattle. We are looking at including a legume in the mix to produce nitrogen for the soil, turnips for cattle grazing and to improve water infiltration in the soil, oats or triticale for forage, and a deep rooted broadleaf such as canola or sunflower.

We feel cover crops will enhance our soil's health which will be beneficial to our farming operation. It's up to us to figure out how to make it work!

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