

Water Quality Enhancement Activity – WQL16– Use of Legume Cover Crops as a Nitrogen Source



Enhancement Description

This enhancement is for the use of legume cover crops as a primary source of nitrogen in a cropping system. Use of legume cover crops is applicable to conventional, specialty and organic crop production systems.

Land Use Applicability

This enhancement is applicable to cropland.

Benefits

Approximately 35,000 cu ft natural gas is required to produce one ton of nitrogen fertilizer. Legume cover crops can provide 50 to 100 lbs of plant available nitrogen per acre to reduce off-farm energy requirements.

Criteria

- Plant and manage legume cover crops prior to all field or specialty crops raised that require the use of commercial nitrogen.
- Estimate nitrogen credits from the leguminous crop. The legume cover crop must be selected and managed to supply at least 75 lbs of N. Nitrogen credit estimate should consider:
 - The amount of biomass produced (plant height and maturity)
 - The nutrient composition of the cover crop (for example, clover vs. vetch)
 - The decomposition rate of the cover crop during the cash crop growing season based on incorporation of the residue or being left on the soil surface after planting. Note: An example procedure is outlined in “*Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 3rd Edition*” (Sarrantonio, 1998)
- Determine additional nitrogen application rates based on guidelines of the state Land Grant University. Nitrogen application rates must be reduced by at least 75 lbs. to account for the nitrogen available from the legume cover crop.

Documentation Requirements

1. Written documentation for each year of this enhancement describing the following items:
 - Type of legume cover crop planted
 - Calculations for estimating available nitrogen
 - Application rates of additional nitrogen by field
 - Realistic yield goals for field or specialty crop grown
2. A map showing where the enhancement is applied

ALABAMA SUPPLEMENT TO WQL16 –USE OF LEGUME COVER CROPS AS A NITROGEN SOURCE

How Much N?

To find out if you might need more N than your green manure will supply, you need to estimate the amount of N in your cover crop. To do this, assess the total yield of the green manure and the percentage of N in the plants just before they die.

To estimate yield, take cuttings from several areas in the field, dry and weigh them. Use a yardstick or metal frame of known dimensions (1 ft. x 2 ft., which equals 2 ft² works well) and clip the plants at ground level within the known area. Dry them out in the sun for a few consecutive days, or use an oven at about 140° F for 24 to 48 hours until they are “crunchy dry.” Use the following equation to determine per-acre yield of dry matter:

$$\text{Yield (lb.)/Acre} = \frac{\text{Total weight of dried samples (lb.)}}{\text{\# square feet you sampled}} \times \frac{43,560 \text{ sq. ft.}}{1 \text{ Acre}}$$

While actually sampling is more accurate, you can estimate your yield from the height of your green manure crop and its percent groundcover. Use these estimators:

At 100 percent groundcover and 6-inch height*, most nonwoody legumes will contain roughly 2,000 lb./A of dry matter. For each additional inch, add 150 lb. So, a legume that is 18 inches tall and 100 percent groundcover will weigh roughly:

$$\text{Inches } > 6: 18 \text{ in.} - 6 \text{ in.} = 12 \text{ in.}$$

$$\times 150 \text{ lb./in.: } 12 \text{ in.} \times 150 \text{ lb./in.} = 1,800 \text{ lb.}$$

$$\text{Add } 2,000 \text{ lb.: } 2,000 \text{ lb.} + 1,800 \text{ lb.} = 3,800 \text{ lb.}$$

If the stand has less than 100 percent groundcover, multiply by (the percent ground cover / 100). In this example, for 60 percent groundcover, you would obtain:

$$3,800 \times (60/100) = 2,280 \text{ lb.}$$

Keep in mind that these are *rough estimates* to give you a quick guide for the productivity of your green manure. To know the exact percent N in your plant tissue, you would have to send it to a lab for analysis. Even with a delay for processing, the results could be helpful for the crop if you use split applications of N. Testing is always a good idea, as it can help you refine your N estimates for subsequent growing seasons.

The following rules of thumb may help here:

- Annual legumes typically have between 3.5 and 4 percent N in their aboveground parts prior to flowering (for young material, use the higher end of the range), and 3 to 3.5 percent at flowering. After flowering, N in the leaves decreases quickly as it accumulates in the growing seeds.

* For cereal rye, the height relationship is a bit different. Cereal rye weighs approximately 2,000 lb./A of dry matter at an 8-inch height and 100 percent groundcover. For each additional inch, add 150 lb., as before, and multiply by (percent groundcover/100). For most small grains and other annual grasses, start with 2,000 lb./A at 6 inches and 100 percent ground cover. Add 300 lb. for each additional inch and multiply by (percent groundcover/100).

- For perennial legumes that have a significant number of thick, fibrous or woody stems, reduce these estimates by 1 percent.

- Most cover crop grasses contain 2 to 3 percent N before flowering and 1.5 to 2.5 percent after flowering.

- Other covers, such as brassicas and buckwheat, will generally be similar to, or slightly below, grasses in their N content. To put it all together:

$$\text{Total N in green manure (lb./A)} = \frac{\text{yield (lb./A)} \times \% \text{ N}}{100}$$

To estimate what will be available to your crop this year, divide this quantity of N by:

- 2, if the green manure will be conventionally tilled;
- 4, if it will be left on the surface in a no-till system in Northern climates;
- 2, if it will be left on the surface in a no-till system in Southern climates.

Bear in mind that in cold climates, N will mineralize more slowly than in warm climates, as discussed above. So these are gross estimates and a bit on the *conservative* side.

Of course, cover crops will not be the only N sources for your crops. Your soil will release between 10 and 40 lb. N/A for each 1 percent organic matter. Cold, wet clays will be at the low end of the scale and warm, well-drained soils will be at the high end. You also may receive benefits from last year's manure, green manure or compost application.

Other tools could help you refine your nitrogen needs. On-farm test strips of cover crops receiving different N rates would be an example. Refer to Appendix A, *Testing Cover Crops on Your Farm* (p. 189) for some tips on designing an on-farm trial. In some regions, a pre-sidedress N test in spring could help you estimate if supplemental N will be cost-effective. Bear in mind that pre-sidedress testing does not work well when fresh plant residues have been turned in—too much microbial interference relating to N tie-up may give misleading results.

For more information on determining your N from green manures and other amendments, see the *Northeast Cover Crop Handbook* (361).

—Marianne Sarrantonio, Ph.D.

Refer to the Alabama NRCS Conservation Practice Standard, Pasture and Hayland Planting (512) for planting requirements.

Reference: Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 3rd Edition

<http://www.sare.org/publications/covercrops/covercrops.pdf>

ALABAMA SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION FOR THIS ENHANCEMENT

WQL16 - Use of Legume Cover Crops as a Nitrogen Source

Example procedure for calculating the estimated available nitrogen and determining the decomposition rate of the cover crop based on incorporation of residue or being left on soil surface is located in the reference "*Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 3rd Edition*" (Sarrantonio, 1998), pgs 22-23. The website link to the reference is below.

<http://www.sare.org/publications/covercrops/covercrops.pdf>

Documentation Form

Producer Name:				Date:	
Tract Number(s):			County:		
Field Number(s):					
Legume Cover Crop Planted:					
Calculations for Estimating Available Nitrogen from Legume Cover Crop:					
Amount of Biomass Produced:					
%N in Legume Cover Crop:					
Decomposition Rate:					
Estimated Available N:					
Annual Crop Planted:					
Current Soil Test Nitrogen Recommendation:					
Application Rate for additional Nitrogen:					
Realistic Yield Goal:					

The submitted records accurately reflect the implementation of this enhancement.

SIGNATURE: _____