

# NRCS NEWS RELEASE

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## **Farmers re-discover the cover: Expert says old practice taking root with new pioneers**

ST PAUL, MN, April 15, 2013 – It’s something old and something new. It’s something borrowed and something... well, green.

Cover cropping, a traditional conservation practice considered old-fashioned by many in modern agriculture, is being “borrowed” and used in new ways by innovative farmers to improve their soil’s health – and with it, the health of their businesses’ bottom line.

“Today’s agricultural pioneers have figured out how to make cover crops work on their farms, with some impressive results,” said Doug Miller, a soil health specialist with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in Jordan, Minnesota. “But innovation is the key to maximize the effective use of covers,” Miller said. “Everyone’s situation is different; cover crops aren’t a ‘one size fits all’ practice that can be done the same way on every farm.”

Miller said that while the basic principles of cover crops may stay the same, the best genetics, establishment, and termination methods for an agricultural operation can vary widely with respect to objectives, location, weather conditions, crops, soil types, and more.

“Before World War II, most farmers included forage legumes like alfalfa and red clover in crop rotations ahead of nitrogen-demanding crops like corn. Forage grasses and small grains were also commonly used to curb soil erosion,” Miller said.

Over the last five years, interest in cover crops has begun to surge again, driven by many interacting factors including increasing input costs, cover crop cost-share programs, new GPS-guidance technologies that facilitate new ways of using cover crops and the arrival of radishes as a novel cover crop with few residue management challenges.

“It’s going to take some time and effort to figure out how to get millions of acres of cover crops planted and managed effectively,” Miller said. “To make cover crop use mainstream, many more farmers will have to adapt the practice to their farms, not just adopt the practice.”

Through conservation programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Miller said NRCS is working to help farmers adapt those practices to their farms. “We’re ramping up our efforts here in Minnesota to ensure we can assist producers who are interested in implementing systems that improve soil health,” Miller said.

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“Cover crop management today isn’t just a revisiting of old practices abandoned by the fathers and grandfathers of today’s farmers,” Miller said. “Innovative large-scale grain farmers have started integrating cover crops into their production systems in ways that were never even considered before.”

Miller said cover crops used in soil health management systems help build organic matter, increase water holding capacity, suppress pests, diseases and weeds, and offer other on-farm benefits.

And the benefits of improved soil health extend beyond the farm. “Producers who improve the health of their soil are also increasing its water-holding capacity, which reduces runoff that can cause flooding and improved infiltration keeps nutrients and sediment from being carried off-site into nearby lakes, rivers, and streams,” he said.

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