

**Soil Quality Enhancement Activity – SQL09 – Conversion of cropped land to grass-based agriculture**



**Enhancement Description**

Conversion of cropped land to grass-based agriculture is the establishment of mixtures of perennial grasses, forbs and legume species on cropland where annually-seeded cash crops have been grown in monocultures. Select perennial species based on species compatibility, forage quality potential, improvements to soil quality, beneficial effects for wildlife and/or production of biomass.

**Landuse Applicability**

Cropland

**Benefits**

Perennial plants maintain a living root system throughout the year that provides habitat and organic exudates (food) for soil biota responsible for decomposition and nutrient cycling. Perennials provide soil cover for most of the year and are managed with little or no physical disturbance of the soil. High plant biomass production contributes to increased soil organic matter accumulation. Plant mixtures provide diversity in plant structure, soil cover that moderates soil temperature extremes, rooting depths that improve soil structure and residue quality that stimulates microbial activity. The combination of these factors results in improved soil quality, reduced runoff and erosion and improved water quality.

Many species of birds and animals, including song birds, quail, turkey, pheasants, deer and rabbits, use grasslands as cover and nesting areas, to find food and to rear their young. Managing grassland harvesting techniques can be beneficial to the survival of ground nesting birds and other wildlife species. Altering harvesting patterns can provide escape routes for hens, hens with broods, and hiding fawns. Delaying harvest or leaving portions of a field unharvested can provide nesting habitat. When grassland management and harvesting schedules are planned to alleviate man-made pressures on wildlife, high biomass producing, perennial species can provide desirable habitat for wildlife populations.

**Conditions Where Enhancement Applies**

This enhancement applies to cropland that is currently in annual crop production. It does not apply to cropland that is currently in a permanent perennial crop such as permanent hay, orchards or vineyards.

**Criteria**

1. Establish perennial grassland species (e.g., switchgrass, big bluestem, indiangrass, eastern gamagrass, etc.) on cropland according to the NRCS Pasture and Hay Planting (512) conservation practice standard.



2. Minimize soil erosion and disturbance when establishing perennials by using techniques such as no-till planting, use of nurse crops that germinate quickly and/or the use of suitable erosion control practices.
3. Use seeding mixtures of at least three perennial grasses, perennial forbs and/or legumes.
4. Use plant density observations from multiple areas in the field(s) to confirm successful establishment two years from the planting date; compare the actual to the recommended plant density for the seeding mix and region (e.g., at least 10 plants of the seeded mixture per square yard).
5. If the field will be grazed, a grazing management plan that meets CSP eligibility requirements must be developed and followed.

### **Adoption Requirements**

This enhancement is considered adopted on each acre when the annually planted cropland acre has been successfully established to the chosen perennial grass species mix.

### **Documentation Requirements**

1. Provide a map showing the location of the field(s) that were converted from cropland to grassland,
2. List the species that were included in the planting mix for each field,
3. Provide a record of plant density by species (seeded and volunteer; number of plants/sq yd for each species present) for multiple areas in the field(s) prior to harvest each year, and
4. Grazing management plan (as applicable).

### **References**

Jokela, B. and M. Russelle. 2010. Perennial Forages Benefit Soils, Other Crops, & Water Quality. Forage Focus. USDA-ARS. <http://www.midwestforage.org/pdf/452.pdf.pdf>

Magdoff, F. and H. van Es. Cover Crops. 2000. *In* Building soils for better crops. 2nd ed. Sustainable Agriculture Network Handbook Series. National Agriculture Library. Beltsville, MD. pp 87-96.

Wright, D., J. Marois, M. Vargas and P. Wiatrak. 2003. Perennial Grasses, Soil Organic Matter, And Crop Yield. Proc. of Sod Based Cropping Systems Conference. North Florida Research and Education Center-University of Florida. Quincy, FL.



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

**IDAHO ADDENDUM 2013**  
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Plants listed on the table below are recommended perennial grasses, forbs and legumes for forage or biomass production on converted cropland in Idaho. Choose at least three from this list. **The recommended mix is at least two grasses and one forb.**

<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Longevity</u>	<u>Seedling Growth</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Seeds/Lb</u>	<u>1 lb/acre Seeds/ft<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>Precip</u>	<u>Soil</u>	<u>Depth</u>	<u>PLS Rate</u>
<b><u>GRASSES</u></b>									
Brome, Meadow	Long	Med-Rapid	Bunch	93,000	2	+14	c-sl	¼ - 1/2	10
Foxtail, Creeping	Long	Low	Sod	750,000	17	+18	wet-c-l	1/8 - 1/4	3
Orchardgrass	Long	Medium	Bunch	540,000	12	+16	c-sl	¼ - 1/2	4
Timothy	Long	Medium	Bunch	1,230,000	28	+18	c-sl	1/8 - 1/4	3
Wheatgrass, Intermediate	Long	Rapid	Sod	80,000	2	+13	cl-sl	¼ - 1/2	10
Wheatgrass, Newhy	Long	Medium	Sod	139,000	3	+14	saline	¼ - 1/2	8 (12 saline)
Wheatgrass, Pubescent	Long	Rapid	Sod	80,000	2	+11	l-s	¼ - 1/2	10
Wheatgrass, Tall	Long	V. Rapid	Bunch	78,000	2	+14	saline	¼ - 3/4	10 (15 saline)
Wildrye, Russian	Long	Low	Bunch	170,000	4	+8	c-sl	¼ - 1/2	6 (9 saline)
<b><u>FORBS-LEGUMES</u></b>									
Alfalfa	Medium	Medium	Erect	200,000	5	+14	Sil-sl	1/8 – 1/2	5
Burnet, Small	Medium	Medium	Erect	42,000	1	+14	c-sl	¼ - 1/2	20
Clover, Alsike	Short	Medium	Erect	700,000	16	+18	wet	1/8 – 1/4	3
Clover, Red	Short	Medium	Erect	275,000	6	+18	Sil-cl	¼ - 1	6
Clover, White	Med-Long	Medium	Erect	800,000	18	+18	Wet/cl-sil	1/8 – 1/4	4
Milkvetch, Cicer	Long	Low	Erect	130,000	3	+15	c-l	¼ - 1/2	7
Sanfoin	Medium	Medium	Erect	18,500	0.4	+14	Sil-s	¼ - 3/4	34
Trefoil, Birdsfoot	Long	Low	Erect	375,000	9	+19	c-s	¼ - 1/2	3

**Soil:** vfls = very fine sandy loam; fsl = fine sandy loam; sl = sandy loam; l = loam; sil = silty; lfs = loamy fine sand; ls = loamy sand; cl = clay loam; s = sand; c = clay; sc = sandy clay; sic = silty clay; wet = saturated; moist = moist-well drained; limy = high calcium content; rocky = 2" plus rock; gravel = 1/8-2" rock.

*This list is modified from Plant Materials Tech Note 24 - Table 1.*

For additional information, refer to the following:

Idaho NRCS Plant Materials Technical Note 10, *Pasture and Range Seedings*. [ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn10\\_pasture.pdf](ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn10_pasture.pdf)

Idaho NRCS Plant Materials Technical Note 11, *Pasture – Species Selections and Grazing Management Guidelines*. [ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn11\\_pasture.pdf](ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn11_pasture.pdf)

Idaho NRCS Plant Materials Technical Note 24, *Conservation Plant Species for the Intermountain West*. [ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn24\\_seed\\_species\\_1011.pdf](ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn24_seed_species_1011.pdf)

Idaho NRCS Plant Material Technical Note 24 Supplement: *Intermountain Planting Guide*, USDA-ARS Forage and Range Research Lab/Utah State Extension, AG 510. <ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/ID/programs/technotes/tn24supplement.pdf>

University of Idaho Bulletin 547, *Idaho Forage Handbook*. <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/forage/index.html>

**This activity may NOT be used with the following enhancements:**

**AIR03, ANM12, ANM21, ANM23, ENR12, SQL08, WQL10, WQL17, WQL20, WQL25, WQT08, CCR99**

**Potential Duplicate Practices:**

**512 – Forage and Biomass Planting, 327 – Conservation Cover, 528 – Prescribed Grazing**