

Green County Success from the Field

Ground Cover Seeding Adds to Soil and Water Conservation

Hunters know that small food plots are often best, a half-acre of brassicas in the midst of a thickly-wooded river bottom or a logging trail carpeted with ladino clover. Most are either tilled in with small equipment or simply spread by hand. But 1,000 acres of mostly contiguous cropland seeded down with rye, winter wheat, turnips or radishes? All in just a few hours – by air.

That’s precisely what happened last year in rural Green County just north of the Illinois state line. A single engine crop duster dropped thousands of pounds of seeds on fields of corn and soybeans as they began to ripen, just weeks ahead of the fall harvest. The purpose is to promote soil and water conservation within the Spring Creek Watershed located in southern Green County.

Numerous local landowners participated in the operation, according to Green County Natural Resource Conservation conservationist Jason Thomas. “Green County has 33 active contracts with about 30 completed contracts in the past three years. He and Conservation Technician Tonya Gratz are on hand to view the day’s seeding operation.

The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) provides technical and financial help to landowners for conservation practices such as the protection of soil and water quality. Cost-sharing is available, currently at about \$63 per acre.

“There are about 20 landowners in the program in the county,” Thomas said. There are others who opt out of EQIP but accomplish the same goals, he noted.

“The best time for aerial seeding of soybeans is when the leaves are about 50 percent yellowed,” said Thomas. “This assures that the leaves will drop on the seeds to assist with moisture retention and germination.” The earthworms take the seed into their burrows and actually bury the seed, he added.

As Thomas and Gratz look on, Dean Heimermann, of Country-side Aviation LLC, in Chilton, makes pass after pass over the fields with his single engine AT802 which can carry varying payloads depending on the density of the seed. In the case of rye, the aircraft can deliver 4,700 lbs. to approximately 53 acres of land.



Jason Thomas, NRCS conservationist for Green County, surveys a soybean field after it has been seeded down with cover crops as part of an Environmental Quality Incentive Program for area landowners seeking to prevent soil erosion

The procedure calls for a quick turnaround at a grass strip near Brodhead in Green County. As the 1,295 horsepower engine continues to spin at a dull roar, a local coop runs an elevator to the bin located just fore of the cockpit.

“I’m pleased with the portion of our business that is dedicated to seeding today,” Heimermann said. “We have seen cover crop work spike in recent years largely due to conservation funding that has given growers the opportunity to see the benefits of cover crops.” He also noted growers like the aerial application because the seeding can be done into standing corn and soybeans without damaging the crop.

A statewide drought in 2012 led to an uptick in soil conservation efforts, said Thomas. “The awareness of soil health and using cover crops to improve soil health really increased around 2012 in our area,” he explained. More silage corn was taken during the drought, thus there was less residue to protect the soil (leading to) increased erosion.



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“Cover crops were also planted after the drought to increase farm forage feedstocks,” he noted. “Many liked the benefits they saw from the cover crops and continued to use and experiment with them. It kind of snowballed.”

The similarity between the seed species dropped on cropland and those applied to the food plots of many hunting enthusiasts is not lost on the conservation specialists. “The cover crops provide forage for all kinds of wildlife as well,” noted Gratz. Sportsmen around the state often include a couple varieties of turnips or radishes in food plots, along with kale, rape and winter wheat.

Farmers and forest landowners will want to plan ahead and sign up early for USDA conservation funding under EQIP, according to Angela Biggs, USDA NRCS state conservationist in Wisconsin. Applications for both farmers and forest landowners are taken at all USDA Service Centers in Wisconsin.

This article first appeared in Wisconsin Outdoor News. Lee Fahrney is a freelance outdoors writer from Iowa County.



A single engine AT802 piloted by Dean Heimermann of Countryside Aviation LLC, in Chilton, spreads cover crops over the Spring Creek Watershed in Green County. The operation is partially funded through a USDA program.

