

# Self-guided cover crop tours underway



Winona County SWCD resource specialist Lance Klessig, left, and landowner Robb Miller look at soil structure and roots from a triticale cover crop planted in 2019 on Miller's Lewiston farm. Miller is one of seven landowners participating in a Winona County spring cover crop tour.

**Photo Credit:** Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD

## Waseca, Winona County SWCDs invite farmers to bring a shovel, return throughout growing season to see crops' progress

Farmers in two southern Minnesota counties can learn about their neighbors' experiences implementing cover crops through self-guided tours this spring and summer.

The Winona County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) is facilitating a nine-stop, self-guided

tour scheduled to run through the end of July. About 100 miles to the west, Waseca SWCD is offering a 10-site tour through mid-June, hosted by eight landowners. Both counties' tours started April 1, and both encourage visiting throughout the growing season to mark crops' progress.

Funds earmarked for education from a Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Drinking Water Protection for Southeast Minnesota Clean Water Fund grant support the Winona County tour.

"With the COVID-19 restrictions, we wanted to find an alternative



**Left:** Worms are visible within the root structure of a cereal rye cover crop. **Middle:** A cover crop seed mix contains buckwheat, flax and multiple clover species. **Photo Credits:** Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD **Right:** Signs from Waseca SWCD's fall 2020 self-guided cover crop tour are being re-used this spring. **Photo Credit:** Mark Schaetzke, Waseca SWCD

“ There’s a comfort level in seeing someone else doing it locally, and I really hope this tour results in relationship building. ”

— Mark Schaetzke, District Manager, Waseca SWCD

to traditional field days to continue providing opportunities for farmers to learn from each other,” said Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD resource specialist, who organized the Winona County tour.

This is Waseca SWCD’s second self-guided cover crop tour. The first ran in November and December and was funded by a \$500 grant for virtual field events from BWSR in partnership with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Minnesota Office for Soil Health (MOSH). Signs from the fall tour were used for the spring tour, which was also supported by SWCD staff and district funds.

“I hope (farmers) gain an understanding that this is feasible, it’s doable,” said Mark Schaetzke, Waseca SWCD manager. “There’s a comfort level in seeing someone else doing it locally, and I really hope this tour results in relationship building.”

Klessig asked Schaetzke for advice based on his experience with the tour in Waseca County last fall.

“It was really helpful to talk to him about what worked, what didn’t and how we could adapt,” Klessig said.

Both counties’ tours aim to provide a hands-on experience: farmers are encouraged to bring a shovel to view root systems and soil conditions.

“So many farmers are



*Corn was planted into a rye cover crop on this Winona County farm in May 2020. Roughly a month later, a cover crop mix of annual ryegrass, brassicas, clover and other species was inter-seeded into the corn when it was 8-10 inches tall.*

**Photo Credit:** Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD

tactile people,” Klessig said. “Providing them an opportunity to see cover crops firsthand and do it when it fits their schedule — that’s the goal.”

Winona County sites are marked with signs that provide details about each farmer’s approach to cover crops, which can include inter-seeding, vertical tillage and no-till. Goals vary from farmer to farmer. Some focus on decreasing soil erosion or producing quality dairy feed while others

prioritize holding nitrogen in the soil and increasing soil biology. Farmer contact information is available in case the tour prompts questions.

Sheldon Luehmann started experimenting with soil health practices in 2019, beginning with about 30 acres of no-till corn. The following year, he used no-till for the majority of his corn, soybean and alfalfa operations in Utica and Norton townships.

“I was hooked,” Luehmann



said. “Some of the benefits I hope to achieve from adding cover crops are increasing soil organic matter, increasing water infiltration rates, and increasing overall soil health to have my crops be better able to withstand severe weather events.”

Luehmann’s Norton Township farm is one of the stops featured on the Winona County tour. Last fall, he planted cereal rye, kale and radishes as cover crops. He also began a three-year rotation on a few acres where he intends to graze his animals on species such as kale, cabbage, cow peas and sorghum.

Luehmann said he encourages new adopters to start small and have patience. “Try it out on a small amount of acres with minimal financial risks, but don’t only try it one time and say it didn’t work. Drive around and watch other farmers doing it, pull in their yard and talk to them about it, and ask questions.”

In Waseca County, flyers detailing practices, goals, and landowners’ contact information are available at each site. Schaetzke encourages participants to bring not only a shovel but also a thermometer — to learn more about how cover crops affect soil temperature.

“Cover crops can be kind of like icebergs — there’s as much or more going on below ground than there is above ground,” Schaetzke said. “The soil structure isn’t something you’ll notice just looking at the field.”

Both SWCDs took a proactive approach to marketing the tours. Winona SWCD has promoted the event through social media, the SWCD’s website and via a [YouTube video](#). Klessig said he’s also reached out to several local high schools to invite students to get out on the land after a year of virtual learning. In addition, Klessig notified media about the tour, resulting in local newspaper coverage.

Schaetzke promoted the Waseca County tour via the SWCD’s website. He contacted local media and worked with the Freeborn Area Soil Health Team, which emailed those who signed up to be notified about cover crops and related practices.

Waseca SWCD offers support for landowners interested in cover crops by connecting them with the Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance, a joint powers organization that



*A sign highlights cover crops on a Winona County farm. In this instance, 60 inch corn was planted into a cereal rye cover crop. Photo Credit: Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD*

offers up to \$25 per acre with a 50% match from the landowner. Schaetzke says One Watershed, One Plan implementation funding for the Cannon River Watershed may also be leveraged in the future to support the use of cover crops.

“Every (county) has a few people doing good things with soil health,” Schaetzke said. “This (tour) is a chance to lift them up, show them off a little bit and support

them in that way.”

Winona County SWCD had 42 active cover crop contracts as of fall 2020, Klessig said. The district leverages local SWCD capacity funding, state allocations, and the Drinking Water Protection for Southeast Minnesota grant to assist landowners with cover crop implementation.

Assistance provided by the SWCD through these

funding mechanisms involves a \$30 per acre payment on up to 30 acres with a three-year commitment.

“Farmers learn best from farmers,” Klessig said. “We’re helping facilitate the tour, but the farmers are providing the opportunity to come into the fields. I hope new connections will be made and strengthened in the community as a result.”