In Polk County, a full-service approach to cover crop trials

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

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Gabe Okins' shared-services position is funded through a soil health outreach grant from BWSR. Based at the Red Lake County SWCD, he works in nine northwestern Minnesota counties.

CROOKSTON — A pilot project underway this fall in Polk County is introducing farmers to cover crops by targeting spots within low-residue, erosion-prone sugar beet, soybean and edible bean fields where that soil health practice may offer immediate solutions to erosion and compaction.

As the weather-dependent harvest unfolds, the half-dozen farmers who signed on to the Northwest Minnesota Cover Crop Initiative will work with Red Lake County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) based soil health outreach technician Gabe Okins to determine what cover crops are planted when and where.

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>
> — Gabe Okins,
> soil health outreach technician

"We're going to provide a free service of spreading the cover crops, providing the cover crop seed and meeting the farmers at their field, meeting them with their needs," Okins said. "The thought behind this is to reach out to folks that might not be willing to do full-field cover crops and provide them

Polk County farmer Shaun Gullekson, center, learned about the targeted cover crop services available through the Farmer Climate Action Fund grant from West Polk SWCD technician Morgan Torkelson, left. He planned to work with Red Lake County SWCD-based soil health outreach technician Gabe Okins, right, to decide what type of cover crop to plant when and where.
Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

with an option to try cover crops on targeted acres to hopefully see the benefits."

An $8,500 Farmer Climate Action Fund grant available through the University of Minnesota Extension's Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships covers the cost of seed, equipment and outreach.

The initiative grew out of regional soil health professionals' discussions about how to get producers — particularly those less inclined to adopt conservation practices — to try cover crops and, eventually, adopt the practice on their own. On a larger scale, cover crops can help to mitigate the effects of climate change — holding moisture during dry conditions, allowing infiltration during wet conditions, and resisting wind erosion by holding soil in place.

Building relationships with farmers is central to the effort, which addresses cost, timing and equipment.

The pilot involves producers who signed letters of support for West Polk SWCD's grant application. Among them is Shaun Gullekson, who was considering how cover crops might reduce erosion and compaction along ditches and field edges.

"I am interested in the pilot program because I believe cover crops provide many benefits to soil health. I want to reduce erosion as much as possible and get living roots into areas that see high machine and water traffic. The program helps with application, which, in the fall, can be tough to squeeze into a busy harvest schedule," Gullekson said.

Shaun Gullekson took a look at his soybean crop July 23 in Polk County.

Soil health outreach technician Gabe Okins will work with farmers this season to determine what cover crops to plant when and where.

Okins said cover crops planted in strips and along field edges can also curb soil loss by acting as a windbreak.

"Our target is low-residue crops. Sugar beets. Soybeans. Dry beans. Areas that are easy to manage or already have management on them that allow for easy cover crop establishment," Okins said.

In sugar beet fields, cover crops could speed harvest by preventing equipment from getting stuck in wet fields. Oats grown on ground left bare after the pre-pile harvest — the limited, earlier harvest that allows processing plants to ramp up to 24-hour production — could take up that excess moisture by the time the October harvest is full swing, when trucks and heavy equipment drive on those cleared rows and headlands.

The idea is to parlay the pilot to obtain more funding, and then advertise the service next summer, making it available to more producers via partnerships with Kittson, Marshall County, Norman County and Red Lake County SWCDs.

Eventually, organizers envision the potential to partner with sugar beet cooperatives, making available a tractor and rental spreader that could travel from field to field seeding cover crops on the pre-pile acres.

For now, a truck with a 12-volt spreader will handle the pilot project. It is anticipated that each producer will start with 8 to 10 acres of an oats or rye cover crop, planted where it's most needed within a field.

"The goal is to see what producers' crop rotation is, what their goals are. And if they aren't doing cover crops on the full field, let's look at a targeted approach," Okins said.

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.