

RITA in Action

Planting Green: Cover Crop Field Day in Delaware County

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The adoption of cover crops can be a daunting task to farmers. Conservation professionals ask them to “improve” their operation by adding even more demands to their already full plate. In the midst of tracking commodity prices, managing labor and equipment, researching new seed suppliers, and actually getting out in the field - can we really expect them to sink their teeth into a new practice? Even if we’ve convinced them of the value of cover crops in their field - pest management, weed suppression, erosion control, improved microbial activity, etc - the transition may exact too high of a cost for it to be a realistic change for farmers.

I participated in the tillage transect in Delaware County this year and was amazed at the amount of sites with reduced or no-till practices who had not yet adopted cover crops. Very few fields, outside of our board members’ operations, had signs of cover crop practices at all. The SWCD is actively promoting cover crop adoption through cost-share programs and educational materials, but realizes the need for further programming to make cover crops more understandable and approachable for farmers.

This year, the SWCD staff (Lauren Ayers and Clair Burt) decided to host a field day devoted to understanding the nuts and bolts of cover crops. SWCD Board Chair, Erik Fisher, is a farmer, tile installer, and seed dealer in the county (talk about a lot of hats!) who farms using no-till and cover crop practices. He hosted the field day at his farm and invited fellow supervisors, Joe Hamilton and Jeremy Russell, to co-present on how the different techniques they’ve used when planting cover crops.

Despite being a cover crop event on a sunny Spring day, 15+ farmers in Delaware County showed up and engaged with the speakers and content. After presentations from Barry Fisher (Cover crop adoption and soil health) and Wes Slain (NRCS Programs & Services), we took the group outside to actually walk through the equipment modifications that Erik, Joe, and Jeremy have made to make cover cropping possible in their operations. Farmers were able to ask them questions and really tease out all of the details before breaking for lunch and continuing those conversations with conservation partners and each other.



Based on post-event surveys, attendees walked away feeling inspired to implement cover crops, multi-species seeding, and non-neonicotinoid seed coatings. The majority of them planned to share information that they had learned at the field day with their network - highlighting the equipment recommendations and ideas that they had gleaned from the supervisor farmers. We plan to follow up this event with more programming that actually gets into the weeds of cover crops. After seeing the success of this first event this year, I look forward to participating in the tillage transect next year and seeing how much green peeks out between the rows.