Cover Crop Champions 2013
OVERVIEW

Cover Photo: Ryan Stockwell

Cover crops are increasingly utilized by farmers and promoted by agronomists for the multiple benefits they contribute to soil and crop management systems. Yet, only a small percentage of cropland is planted to cover crops.

The most effective way to increase cover crop adoption is to convince more farmers of the many benefits. And the best way to change farmer behavior is via outreach from fellow farmers.

In 2013, the National Wildlife Federation began supporting cover crops champions - cover crop leaders who can provide region-specific information and farming knowledge to farmers and crop advisors – via financial support for time and travel, media training and access to an elite network of other cover crop champions.

Special consideration was given to applicants from the following states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, South Dakota, Nebraska, Indiana, and Ohio.

Map of cover crop champion locations, courtesy of Batchgeo.
Ideally, we were looking for champions to work in pairs; one farmer working with one outreach professional. Pairing farmers and outreach champions often increases their educational outreach effectiveness. The farmer champion’s role includes traveling around the region and delivering presentations about cover crops and soil health. It could also include hosting a field day, attending field days and other public forums to promote cover crops, and writing articles or giving radio/video interviews. The farmer champion will also work with the outreach champion to answer follow-up questions by phone and email from interested farmers and organizations.

Outreach champions are agricultural professionals who are full time employees of a farm-related organization (for example, a non-profit organization or an educational institution). The role of the outreach champion includes cultivating new farmer champions and supporting current farmer champions by making it easier for the farmer champion to deliver presentations and provide technical assistance. The outreach champion can do this by coaching the farmer champion in basic presentation skills and providing information and data that farmer champions may use on the farm or in outreach efforts.

Champions are expected to conduct outreach activities, including field days, meetings with agricultural advisors, speaking engagements to farmer audiences, media interviews, etc. Each pair is responsible for reaching 150 farmers and 10 crop advisors per year with messages on cover cropping as a practice.
CALCULATING THE EFFICACY OF CHAMPION OUTREACH

In order to capture how effective our champions have been, we asked them to report on their activities, including:

- Events (field days, farm shows)
- Speaking engagements (meetings, conferences)
- Interviews with reporters (print and radio)
- Radio stories and print articles
- Attendance at events

From that information, we can estimate the number of farmers reached and the number of new acres planted to cover crops for each champion. We cannot assume that 100 percent of farmers reached will immediately plant 100 percent of their land to cover crops. We also cannot assume that none of the farmers reached will plant any cover crops. So we consulted several sources to develop a formula.

Charles Ellis of the Lincoln Extension Center surveyed 400 farmers following a cover crop promotion event and 50 said they would try cover crops. From this, we can assume that **12.5% of farmers** reached will try cover crops.

In 2012, SARE surveyed 759 farmers about cover crops and found that respondents planted cover crops on **42 percent** of their acreage.

According to the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture, the average American farm is 418 acres. In our focus states, the average is approximately **300 acres**.

42 percent of 300 acres = **126 acres**

**So our assumption will be that 12.5 percent of our total number of farmers directly reached will plant 126 acres to cover crops.**
I'm a conventional farmer near Stanton in southwest Iowa. We farm about 350 acres where we mostly grow corn and soybeans and a little hay, along with some CRP lands. We do no-till, and during the past few years I started adding cover crops. I believe that the benefits of cover crops, such as preventing soil erosion, improving soil organic matter, and potentially providing extra nitrogen to next year's crop, all far outweigh the risks of planting them. At the same time, I understand the hesitation to try cover crops for those who are new to this practice. That is why I feel I can speak to them effectively and exchange the information that they might need before deciding to try incorporating cover crops on their farms.

**BY THE NUMBERS**
- 12 interviews
- 6 radio stations
- 6 events
- 280 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**
- Spoke at the Environmental Grantmakers Association retreat during the session, “The Dead Zone in the Gulf: Upstream Farming Practices and the Downstream Effects”
- Three days of direct contact with farmers at the Farm Progress Show with over 100,000 in attendance
- Spoke at the PFI Farminar with over 200 participants

“I understand the hesitation to try cover crops... That is why I feel I can speak to them effectively.”
Dave Bishop
Atlanta, Illinois

I have owned and operated PrairiErth Farm for 32 years. We are a 400 acre certified organic operation producing corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, forages, vegetables, beef, pork, broilers, and eggs for local markets. We have used cover crops extensively on the farm since the mid-1980s. We do extensive outreach on the farm, hosting around 1500 visitors annually.

My role as farmer and conservationist has given me the opportunity to work with federal and state programs both as recipient and administrator. In 2009, I initiated the Central Illinois Cover Crops Initiative (CICCI) with NRCS for the purpose of expanding the use of cover crops, focusing on conventional farm operations.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

- 10 speaking engagements
- 1 interview
- 7 events
- 420 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Helped launch Governor Quinn’s (IL) statewide cover crop demonstration project
- Organized “Cover Crops for Sustainable Farms” Workshop at Food Works
- Cover story in Organic Broadcaster, “Cover Crops Bring a Diversity of Benefits to the Farm”

Three profitable practices:

- Cover crops
- Nutrient management
- Drainage water management
The HLWD was established in 1970 to protect and improve the water resources within its boundaries by supporting watershed residents through education and financial programs. This team includes two wife/husband pairs:

Jerry and Nancy Ackermann have been farming for 36 years and are extremely active in on-the-farm research and test plots. The farm is a 1,050-acre crop rotation of corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. For the past eleven years, they have incorporated 350 acres of no-till soybeans and 350 acres of strip-till corn in the crop rotation. Jerry and Terry Perkins have been farming for 38 years on 627 acres of farmland. They cash rent 415 acres to a young farmer who is engaged in a no-till, strip till operation. They farm 112 acres in a no-till soybean and strip till corn rotation. Jerry and Terry have 100 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and three acres in the Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) program.

**BY THE NUMBERS**
- 5 articles printed
- 4 interviews
- 3 events
- 45 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**
- Cover story in Today’s Farm, “Cover Crop Curiosity”
- Lakefield Standard article, “Local cover crop champions to share expertise at field day”
- Daily Globe article, “Area farmers see benefits of cover crops”

“*The NWF Cover Crop Champion education effort is essential to developing a positive relationship between productive agriculture and water quality.*”
Clare Lindahl  
Conservation Districts of Iowa  
Ankeny, Iowa  

Prior to serving as Executive Director of the Conservation Districts of Iowa, I worked for the Scott County Soil and Water Conservation District in Davenport, Iowa, working with urban and agricultural landowners to protect soil and water.

Upon learning about the advantages of cover crops, I have been working to promote cover crops to the commissioners, farmers and crop advisors of Iowa. During nine Spring Regional Meeting around the state I spoke about cover crops and arranged for nine different cover crop farmers to speak on cover crops as well to 250 commissioners and over 80 field staff. I am enthusiastic about soil and water conservation and cover crops. I am honored to have been chosen to lead and support the 500 soil and water conservation district commissioners. I consider it my responsibility to ensure commissioners have the tools they need to tell their story, the story of conservation. These funds and the support of the NWF would help assist in my efforts to empower Iowa’s commissioners.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

- 14 cover crop commissioners
- 943 farmers reached by letter
- 3 cover crop workshops
- 97 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Fourteen cover crop commissioners/farmers recruited
- Developed the Iowa Cover Crop Champion Commissioner Toolbox
- Distributed cover crop benefits information to 943 farmers

"I am enthusiastic about soil and water conservation and cover crops."
We have had many years of experience growing cover crops on our farm. I have shown a Power Point presentation to several groups over the last two years. I would like some technical training to improve my knowledge when I do this again. I would like to host more farm cover crop field days. I would like to continue to speak to groups such as Soil and Water Conservation sponsored events. I have spoken to several large groups of NRCS and farmers interested in cover crops. I would plan to add to this over the next several years. I could interview on the two local radio stations also.

We have been experimenting with cover crops for three years, and it is already apparent that they could be the key to several persistent agriculture issues: erosion control, nitrogen sequestration, and soil improvement.

**BY THE NUMBERS**
- 25 meetings, webinars
- 8 phone calls fielded for cover crop advice
- 2 radio interviews
- 160 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**
- Met with farmers from the town of Griswold to encourage cover crops near the town well to address high N levels
- Met with IA state legislator to discuss benefits of cover crops
- University of Lincoln workshop on economic benefits of cover crops

“Cover crops could be the key to several persistent agriculture issues.”
Lynn Eberhard and Bret Margraf
Bellevue, Ohio

Lynn is a full-time no-till farmer in Northern Seneca County. He has been no-tilling for over 24 years and has utilized cover crops in his system for more than 15 years. He actively participates and attends conservation meetings hosted by the soil and water conservation district as well as state and regional meeting with the Ohio no-till council, the national no-till conference and the conservation tillage conference.

Bret is a Nutrient Management Specialist who works in multiple counties implementing a US EPA grant to target a subwatershed of the Sandusky River in northwest Ohio. He has been successful at improving implementation rates by working one on one with the farmers in this small (112,000 acres) area by developing a relationship, personally being available to answer questions or do a farm visit, taking time or providing resources and contacts to help them solve their problems and also sharing personal farming experiences.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

- 3 interviews
- 10 educational visits
- 24 cover crop road signs installed
- 800 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Provided cover crop information to 15,000 people via media coverage and newsletters
- Built cover crop demo boxes with plexi-glass sides to show rooting depth, water infiltration
- Met with all local cooperatives to promote cover crops

“I am excited about this opportunity to expand my local network to the other sub-watersheds in the counties I work in to ultimately increase cover crop implementation in northwest Ohio.”
Kent Solberg
Verndale, Minnesota

Kent is a Livestock and Grazing Specialist with the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota and an instructor for the Sustainable Food Production program at Minnesota State providing college level instruction on crop rotations, cover cropping, soil health, integrated crop and livestock systems, and planned grazing.

He also co-developed, promoted and organized “Cover Crops for Soil Health and Farm Profitability” workshop and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota’s “Advanced Grazing Workshop – 2013”, and 2 “Pasture Profitability” workshops in 2012.

BY THE NUMBERS

- 9 speaking engagements
- 3 cover crop presentations developed
- 11 farmers given personal consultation
- 217 farmers reached directly

HIGHLIGHTS

- Developing the Midwest Soil Health Summit
- Co-facilitated a roundtable on cover crops and soil health
- Participated in NCAT webinar on cover crops

“Hearing producers say they are going to incorporate cover crops in their management program has been my greatest accomplishment in this program.”
Travis Wolford and Dean Thomas
Preston, MN

Travis is a supervisor on the Fillmore Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Board and co-hosted a cover crop field day with the Land Stewardship Project in 2013. He has been planting cover crops for two years for the nutrient scavenging, compaction and soil biology benefits.

Dean works with NRCS and SWCD promoting cover crops through EQIP and State Cost share money and has been working with MDA and the U of MN with cover crops research projects. He sits on the cover crop council and also helped develop the cover crop tool. He has assisted 30-40 producers with utilizing cover crops in their operations, especially livestock producers who want to utilize the cover crop as supplemental forage.

BY THE NUMBERS

2 interviews
12 agronomists trained
4 print articles
52 farmers reached directly

HIGHLIGHTS

- Front page article on cover crops in the Bluff County Reader
- Radio interview aired three times on two local radio stations
- Article in Grazing Gazette about cover crops and prevented plant

“Our biggest accomplishment has been the relationships built with local agronomists and providing information they can relay back to their customers.”
Lincoln County Extension Center
Missouri

The Missouri champions sit on the Midwest Cover Crop Council and provide demonstrations of successfully inter seeding cover crops into standing corn and soybeans to provide adequate fall growth of the cover crop and shifting the seeding workload to a more opportune time.

Through the use of research farm field days, on-farm field days, service provider meetings and webinars over 600 farmers in Missouri and the upper Midwest have been instructed on the potential benefits and management required for using cover crops.

**BY THE NUMBERS**
- 98 cover crop plots established
- 2 field day tours
- 6 statewide cover crop meetings
- 400 farmers reached directly

**HIGHLIGHTS**
- Cover crop plots has attracted the interest of campus based research faculty
- Soils from the plots will be used to start a soil health database
- Crop Injury Clinic at Bradford Research Farm

“Evaluation results show that many of the farmers attending will be incorporating cover crops in the next year.”