The objective of this document is to provide you with current and helpful information regarding water protection, and the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP).

**Cover Crops are Good Fit for Wheat Stubble Fields**

Harvested wheat fields offer an excellent opportunity for mid-summer cover crop establishment. Fields that would otherwise be open can have cover crops put to work scavenging nutrients, building nitrogen for the next crop, improving soil tilth and breaking up deep compaction. There should always be a goal with the use of cover crops, so specific site conditions and cropping needs will dictate management, but the planting of a cover crop on small grain fields that aren’t producing a cash crop at this time of the year can have economic and environmental benefits.

Cover crops can provide many benefits, but they aren’t a silver bullet for all agronomic challenges. Prioritizing desired outcomes is necessary to building a plan. Some cover crop species with strong taproots are particularly well suited to breaking up compaction, while others with fibrous root systems improve soil structure and tilth. Grass covers are effective scavengers of nutrients. Legume covers can be particularly desirable if the following crop is nitrogen dependent such as corn or sugarbeets. Cover crops will convert mineral forms of nutrients into organic forms, which are more resilient to loss from the field. These organic nutrient sources will be available to following crops differently than mineral fertilizers, so factoring in these nutrient sources for next year’s crop takes some additional management.

The weed control aspects of cover crops shouldn’t be overlooked in wheat stubble fields. The continued proliferation of herbicide resistance weeds makes controlling weed growth and seed production a concern in summer fallow fields. Good stands of cover crops can be effective in outcompeting and shading out weed seedlings, often replacing the need for a separate herbicide application.

Summer rains are essential for good establishment, so some areas may benefit from holding off on planting until rain can build up soil moisture levels. Direct seeding is always the most reliable, consistent means to establish covers, but aerial seeding can be an attractive option as well. Even broadcast seeding can be effective when conditions are right. Termination can be a challenge in some situations, particularly for producers without cover crop experience. Species that winter kill can simplify management, but don’t offer as many benefits as covers that persist into the spring. Flexible management and back-up contingency plans, particularly when it comes to termination, are a key to cover crop success.

Cover crops increase the level of agronomy management required, but can provide numerous environmental benefits while boosting both short and long-term profitability. Crop advisors can be a trusted resource in their management and will to help ensure all factors are considered. The current window of summer fallow fields following small grains is an excellent opportunity begin trying cover crops or experiment with new practices.

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