

National Wildlife Federation annual report to the Midwest Cover Crops Council
Feb. 2019
Springfield, IL

1. Farm Bill changes impacting cover crops
2. Cover Crop Champions
3. Blockchain project

Farm Bill changes impact cover crops: After years of efforts to try to change USDA crop insurance rules on cover crops administratively we finally have success through legislative means. The most significant change is that cover crop management is no longer tied to eligibility for crop insurance for the subsequent cash crop. Instead, cover crops will be managed through the Good Farming Practices process, which evaluates all other agronomic practices on insured crops. Under the old rules, if farmers failed to follow specific guidelines on termination timing, they likely lost crop insurance coverage and had little recourse. Also, the old rules could not evolve over time as research and farmer experience with cover crops grew, essentially locking them in time while agriculture moved forward. This has some important implications for MCCC researchers and extension participants. Primarily, now that cover crop management will be evaluated through GFP, any denial of claim by a crop insurance company relating to cover crop management will now involve agronomic experts (extension, NRCS staff, and researchers, certified agronomists) to evaluate the practice in question. Second, as farmers seek to try new cover crop practices, published research becomes more important for them to be able to justify/defend the newer practice to crop insurance companies.

The Farm Bill also provided a new definition of cover crop termination. The old definition, growth of the cover crop has ended, led to a lot of confusion for farmers and crop insurance adjusters. Did that mean the entire field had to be totally dead? Did growth end when an herbicide was applied or when some plants or all plants turned brown? The new definition, the date in which a practice that historically and under reasonable circumstances results in the termination of the targeted cover crop, provides clarity on timing and qualifications. Under the new definition, termination occurs on the date the practice is applied. As long as the practice used to terminate the cover crop has historically worked and is applied under reasonable conditions, that practice fulfills the definition of termination.

Cover Crop Champions: 2019 is the eighth year of the Cover Crop Champion program. The Champions are cover crop leaders (farmers and conservation outreach staff) who provide region-specific information and farming knowledge to farmers and crop advisors. Financial and technical support from NWF allows Champions to travel around their state to discuss the multiple benefits of cover crop implementation. Training consists of a webinar series as well as an in person communications training to equip the Champions to spread their message more effectively to farmers who have more change aversion and use different decision making models regarding farming practices. This year the program has 40 individual champions who work across 5 states. Historically, our region consists of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio (Sorry Michigan).

NWF has also provided a number of outreach trainings in Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin to conservation and extension staff. NWF is currently developing curriculum to expand this outreach training for conservation professionals to help conservation organizations better reach farmers who do not fit innovator and early adopter mentalities.

Blockchain and cover crops: NWF has started a project to explore the use of blockchain technology to meet growing consumer demand for more sustainable commodities. Blockchain is an online, shared, non-corruptible ledger that documents transactions and transaction details while making such information available to participants. This technology can open the door for sharing information regarding growing practices with supply chain entities and eventually with consumers. Important steps include establishing a low-cost and non-corruptible process for verifying and documenting practices and establishing a new block within blockchain technology to input, record, and share on-farm practice information. NWF expects to have a report out in 2020.