

COVER CROPS/ FORAGES FOLLOWING WHEAT

While we have discussed the use of cover crops considerably in recent years, some excellent rains this spring may provide a better opportunity for cover crops following wheat. Wheat harvest is essentially complete, and this may be a chance for livestock producers to produce more forage for their livestock operation or crop farmers to experiment with the use of cover crops to improve their soil, grow a legume cover crop and provide nitrogen for next year's corn crop or grow a forage crop as a cash crop to sell to livestock producers. Ideally the crop would be grazed, but it could be harvested for hay, silage or green chop.

The use of cover crops is being used more across the Great Plains in no-till cropping systems as a strategy not only for a forage for livestock or to prevent soil erosion, but to improve soil quality. Even if the cover crop doesn't mature, the soil is being improved by the biomass that is produced and recycled in the soil. Research is indicating benefits of growing a second crop by adding carbon and nitrogen and building soil structure, especially under no-till environments. There have been reports around Nebraska and neighboring states about the benefits of planting a mixture of several different species of plants for a cover crop. These are called cover crop cocktails. Some of these mixtures are just planted to improve the soil, while others are utilized for grazing. These cover crop cocktails include: forage peas, vetch, sudangrass, pearl millet, various brassica mixtures, turnips and canola.

If you do want a cover crop that could be grazed, there are forage crops that can be planted at the end of July or early August and used for fall grazing. These include turnips or other brassicas. Oats can provide excellent grazing with good moisture and a little fertility. It is more productive in the fall than wheat, rye or triticale. Oats should be seeded about 3 bushels/acre or about 100 pounds per acre in a prepared seedbed. It should be ready to graze in 6-8 weeks. Oats also works very well if you just want something to hold the soil. Just getting it planted and started growing will help hold the soil better if we do receive some rains in the next few months. If oats comes up and is a few inches tall, it will die when we have a very hard freeze, and temperatures are in the low to mid twenties. It can provide some good winter cover and you don't have to worry about killing it in the spring. There are types of winter peas that could be planted with the oats to increase the protein of the feed and also could add nitrogen to the soil.

If you need a forage for grazing in late winter or early spring, rye or triticale provides the most forage for cows or yearlings. These provide excellent forage, lower hay and pasture requirements, and reduce soil erosion from springtime thunderstorms. The rye or triticale is then usually chemically killed prior to planting in the spring. Sometimes with ideal conditions, the rye will grow faster than the cattle can graze it off. If this occurs, it may be better to harvest the forage as hay. It can also dry out the soil which may affect subsequent crops. There are challenges with some cover crops, but if you have cattle, this may be an option for you to try on a small scale. You also could lease out your cover crop for grazing to cattle producers. In Nebraska several different small grains have been evaluated as cover crops. Over a three-year period of evaluation rye was the most productive and winter hardy, although it must be managed carefully or it may impact your subsequent crop.

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