

Cover crops help local farmers innovate

By Tracy Robillard
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For the Chieftain

In Oregon farming communities, a common reaction to the idea of practices that enhance soil health is: "That won't work here."

A group of farmers in Wallowa County are proving the naysayers wrong — replacing skepticism with innovation. Over the last few years, these farmers have teamed up to share ideas, experiment with field trials and seek technical expertise to develop a unique recipe for soil health that suits their operation.

And even better — they are seeing results on-the-ground, such as better soil moisture and water infiltration, reduced weed pressure, higher crop yields, and enhanced cattle forage, just to name a few.

Their argument is that if it works in Wallowa County, it can work anywhere. That's because these guys farm in a cold, high climate with a very limited growing season. The ground is only frost-free for about six precious weeks of summer.

"Innovation is driven by challenges," said Nick Sirovatka, an agronomist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Oregon. "Without challenge, it's too easy to sit back and keep farming the same way. But producers in the Wallowa Valley know they have to try new approaches if they want to remain profitable and sustainable for the long term."

These farmers were inspired by their NRCS District Conservationist at the time, Nate James. James worked closely with these producers, encouraged them to try different cover crops on their farms and share lessons learned. All of them are using a combination of soil health farming practices, such as cover crops, no-till, crop rotations, and grazing.



Woody Wolfe

The Profit Pragmatist: Woody Wolfe

Woody Wolfe examines every land management action through the data-driven lens of a businessman. His goal is to remain financially profitable while ensuring an environmentally sustainable operation for future generations. Wolfe Ranch produces alfalfa and timothy hay and runs cattle on contract in the summer and fall.

For the last three years, Wolfe has implemented a variety of soil health management practices, including cover crops, crop rotations, no-till and intensive grazing.

"Farming for soil health is a big equation with infinite variables," he said. "The question is not whether it works here, but it's a question of how to make money out of it."

Wolfe plants a cover crop in the spring and fall, and terminates them by leasing out the land for cattle grazing. The key is managing the timing and quality of the forage.

"There's a financial incentive for me to produce high quality forage to gain more weight on the cows, since that's what I get paid on ... I'm not losing any money today with the nutrient cycling, I'm breaking even. But the money I'm making will be how this capitalizes down the road."

The Enthusiastic Experimenter: Kevin Melville

Kevin Melville views soil health as a challenge to try new things. He is constantly experimenting with new approaches and learning what works and what doesn't.



Kevin Melville

Melville farms with his father, Tim, and his brother Kurt. Their operation, Cornerstone Farms Joint Venture, farms about 1,000 acres of dryland wheat and 2,000 acres of irrigated cropland. They grow wheat, barley, oats, peas, alfalfa hay and timothy hay.

Melville uses several soil health practices including direct seeding, a diverse crop rotation, cover cropping, and grazing.

"We don't even own tillage equipment," Melville said. His father has been direct seeding the farm since the early 1980s. "No-till led us into doing a crop rotation because we had to manage all the residue left behind. Once we started rotating the crops and including more diverse crops, our residue problem no longer existed."

The next step was incorporating cover crops, which Kevin has been doing for about five years.

"If you would have told me five years ago that we could grow a waist-high stand of cover crops at this elevation (4,000 feet), I would have said you were crazy. But it's working here."

Kevin leases the cover crop fields for grazing in the fall—a win-win solution for terminating the cover crops while also helping his bottom line.

"Every rancher in Oregon

will line up wanting to graze their cattle on a field like that," he said.

The Cover Crusader: Mark Butterfield

Mark Butterfield is on a quest to get cover crops in the ground during all four seasons. He currently uses a spring and fall cover crop, but his goal is to add a spring and winter cover. He's undertaken this challenge with help from his local NRCS office and by working with his neighbors to try different approaches and learn from one another.

Butterfield is a second generation farmer with two sons who will eventually take over the farm. He primarily grows timothy and alfalfa hay and he raises cattle on 800 acres of family land and 800 additional acres leased from his neighbor.

Butterfield has been using spring and fall cover crops for four years now. His biggest challenge was figuring out how to incorporate cover crops into his rotation.

"People say cover cropping won't work here," Mark said. "I used to say the same thing—that it won't work here like it does in the Midwest. But then I tried it, and I see it working ... You have to find the weak spot in your rotation and put your covers there."

Butterfield admitted that

switching to cover crops required a big up-front investment and a steep learning curve, but once he figured out how they fit best into his rotation, he started to see improvements.

"We saw a huge bump in our alfalfa crop two years after the covers, and we had a better wheat crop a year after the cover crops," he said.

Mark planted alfalfa on a field that had just grown a cover crop, and as a comparison, he planted a neighboring field with conventional alfalfa, using the same farming techniques (minus the covers). The field that had the cover crops produced 1.6 tons more in alfalfa than the other field.

The Crowdsourcing Cropper: Joe Dawson

Joe Dawson's biggest ally in soil health is learning from other farmers and ranchers. He works closely with his neighbors in Wallowa County to experiment with different seed mixes and discuss as a team what works. He uses YouTube and other websites to learn from farmers around the country and the world to get ideas on new approaches. He is always looking for ways to try something new and see how it benefits his soil moisture.

"Your moisture content in your soil is your biggest ally," Joe said.

Dawson is a third generation farmer who started farming in 2011. Both his mother and father come from farming families. He farms 1,100 irrigated acres of hay (timothy and alfalfa) and wheat, and 85 head of cattle.

He's been experimenting with cover crops since 2013, using them as a tool to help yearling cattle put on weight. His goals with cover crops are weed control and reducing fertilizer applications.

Dawson tests his soil frequently. He has a moisture probe in every field he's experimenting in. So far the tests show that the cover cropped fields have better water infil-

tration. His soils retain more moisture in the spring, which is critical since they can't start irrigating until May 1.

Dawson is also seeing increased organic matter in his soil tests; and reduced nitrogen costs from less fertilizer being applied.

The Redefined Rancher: Alan Klages

Several years ago when the wheat market took a plunge, Alan Klages decided it was time to try something new. So he started planting cover crops on a small scale.

"At the time, DNS wheat was only \$5 a bushel; compared to \$10 or \$12 in the past. If wheat were priced higher, we might not be doing this."

However, after seeing the benefits of cover crops on his farm, Klages said he wishes he had been doing it 30 years ago. Farming with soil health practices has redefined Klages' business approach.

Klages Ranch farms 600 acres of irrigated cropland, primarily alfalfa, timothy hay and wheat. He runs 250 mother cows which are mostly summered on leased rangeland. After bringing the cattle home in the fall, weaned calves, cow calf pairs and dry cows are put on cover crops depending on timing of rangeland removal and cover crop growth.

Klages has been using cover crops for about six years. He uses a cover crop mix including radishes, turnips and brassicas to help break up the sod and provide a healthy diet for the cows. He uses conventional tillage, but he doesn't have to till as often because the cover crops break up the sod and make the ground much easier to smooth before seeding the cash crop. His cows terminate the cover crop without the need for chemicals.

"My goal is to keep a living plant in the soil all winter," he said. "We are so much more adaptable now that we are doing cover crops and grazing them."

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