

## Advertisement

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# Diversify by growing cover crop seed

**WAVES OF RYE:** This cereal rye crop is being grown for cover crop seed production on Tim and Ethel Sieren's farm at Keota in southeast Iowa. The scene was photographed at a Practical Farmers of Iowa field day on June 10.

By TOMOKO OGAWA

**C**OVER crops have been gaining popularity with row crop and livestock producers and horticulturalists alike. The adoption rate is accelerating nationwide. Iowa had an estimated 400,000 acres of cover crops this spring, with acreage nearly tripling between 2012 and 2013. This rapid growth is predicted to continue for the coming years, which can provide an opportunity for farmers looking to diversify their operation with a new enterprise. Cover crop seed production can help balance farm income, reduce risk, and extend the rotation beyond corn and beans.

To explore the market potential and future projections of cover crop seed production, Practical Farmers of Iowa interviewed crop specialists at five seed houses: Albert Lea Seed House, Minnesota; Green Cover Seed, Nebraska; Welter Seed & Honey Co., Iowa; Cover Crop Solutions, Pennsylvania; and Grassland Oregon.

## Cover crop seed market

These seed houses and many others have seen a major increase in their cover crop seed sales. All cover crop species have increased, but contracted acres for cereal grains such as rye, oats and barley are growing the fastest. Albert Lea Seed House saw a threefold rise in rye alone over the last three years. All the seed houses predict this trend to continue.

Steve Groff, Cover Crop Solutions, says, "Our demand has almost doubled each of the past two years." Among different cover crop species, tillage radish and annual ryegrass have probably seen the most growth for them, while crimson clover, triticale and cereal rye have also significantly increased. Groff predicts a steady increase in cover crop demand will continue for the next five years. "If cover crops are further incentivized by USDA or if fertilizer prices increase, cover crop usage might increase even more," he adds.

Each seed house procures seed through contracted production with farmers, with acreage ranging from 400 to 2,000 acres per seed house. Seed houses support production of many species of cover crop seeds, and the selection and production sites are somewhat similar throughout the industry.

Cereal rye, oats, buckwheat, wheat, triticale and hairy vetch are grown in Iowa and surrounding Midwest states. Tillage radish, lentils, cowpeas, clover, alfalfa, annual ryegrass and field peas, while used as cover crops in the Midwest, are typically grown elsewhere, such as Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Oklahoma, Colorado and Washington. Several seed houses also contract in Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. Small acreage is contracted for less common cover crop species, including mung and guar beans and sugarbeet.

Seed houses welcome any farmers interested in producing cover crop seed, but the time for formalizing contracts is spring and fall. Cover crop seed acres for spring planting are usually contracted by December or January, and in the spring for the fall-planted crops.

Seed houses test seed lots for germination, weed seeds, foreign matter, test weight and moisture. The greatest threat of rejection is weed contamination. While some farmers may have their own seed-cleaning equipment, all seed houses either have a cleaning facility or work with third-party cleaners. Still, it's critical to set combines meticulously and use best practices for production through postharvest.

"Planting in fields that have the low weed pressure is recommended for keeping weeds under control," says Jim Welter of Welter Seed and Honey Co. "Good postharvest handling is a must; proper storage and ventilation is very important in maintaining seed quality," Welter adds.

Keith Berns from Green Cover Seed says growing the crop is just the beginning, "If you are going to do much growing of cover crops, you need to be able to store it on farm. Direct shipping doesn't always work, unless you have special arrangements made ahead of time."

Risa DeMasi, Grassland Oregon, adds, "There are risk management considerations for your farm, too. If the crop doesn't make quality seed, are you prepared to destroy the crop?" Many crops do not have a secondary market for subprime seed. For example, wheat grain that fails to make quality parameters can still be marketed to a grain miller or as animal feed. A farmer growing radish seed that fails to make quality, however, has limited options

and may have to destroy the crop.

There are some legal considerations, too, Groff warns. "If you are growing cover crops to sell seeds, even if just to your neighbors, you are legally required to have the seed tested by a recognized lab to ensure there are no weed seeds, which would increase the population of noxious weeds in the community, and that the seed germination is up to standard."

Also, many varieties are protected by patent or the Plant Variety Protection Act. Producing seed without authorization and violating intellectual property rights could result in costly litigation. Don't assume the company contracting for seed production is giving you correct advice, says DeMasi. Under law, the originator of the seed crop is liable. It's also important to understand the appropriate federal and state seed laws.

## Don't be afraid, start small

We are still a long way from the goal set by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program: 20 million acres of cover crops by 2020. Many things need to happen for cover crops to scale up. For one, seed houses need to ramp up cover crop seed production. Additional infrastructure is also needed, Welter adds, "Cleaning and processing facilities have diminished over the years, rebuilding infrastructure for seed production will be very important."

Matt Leavitt, Albert Lea Seed House, says, "We are committed to this goal in scaling up the production and keep growing in the direction it has been. Benefits of cover crops are clear, but still lots of work is needed to spread the knowledge. The importance comes down to farmer-to-farmer information and sharing our experiences."

"Don't be afraid to try new things on small acres to prove to yourself it can work for you," says Berns. Seed houses are willing to assist growers, answering questions ranging from selecting production species to setting combines properly for harvesting. This is often true whether you are a contract grower for them or just interested in growing cover crops. Farmer satisfaction and success is essential to growing their business.

Ogawa is cover crop grains and food coordinator for Practical Farmers of Iowa.