

Farmer: Plant small grains

BY NICK OHDE

FARMING in northwest Iowa, Nathan Anderson of Bobolink Prairie Farms recently hosted a field day with his wife, Sarah, where he told the crowd some of the reasons why he grows small grains.

The Andersons also raise corn, soybeans and grass-fed beef. (You can read a recap of that field day at practicalfarmers.org/blog/2016/06/30/field-day-recap-managed-grazing.) In addition to small grains, the field day included discussions on pasture improvement, rotational grazing and grazing of multispecies cover crop mixes planted after small-grain harvests.

This year, Anderson grew Prevail, a hard red spring wheat developed in South Dakota. He said because it's a shorter variety, it will be less prone to lodging in windy conditions. The wheat was seeded April 12 with an air seeder at 120 pounds per acre, and was vertically tilled into soybean stubble. He aims to grind some of his harvested wheat for feed and sell the rest into a conventional market.

Reasons to grow small grain

Anderson offers reasons why small grains should be considered for your farm.

■ **Profitability.** With falling commodity prices, Anderson said corn and soybeans are becoming merely break-even crops. After reading the research of Matt Liebman at Iowa State University, showing that the financial returns of three- and four-year rotations are the same as two-year rotations, Anderson became intrigued.

Diverse rotations can be profitable for a number of reasons, but they all boil down to a longstanding PFI tradition: reducing input costs in the form of seed, fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. And because Anderson uses several species of cover crops, growing certain small grains and saving the seed allows him to save money on cover crop seeding costs as well.

■ **Extend the growing (and grazing) season.** Anderson said growing small grains allows him to make better use of the early-spring and late-fall potential for growing crops. While he grows cover crops on corn and soybean ground to expand his grazing acreage without taking land out of row-crop production, growing a small grain allows him to expand that even further: planting a diverse cover crop mix in early August after the small grain harvest allows him to turn



WHY WHEAT? The first stop at a PFI field day near Aurelia was one of the largest wheat fields in Iowa at 55 acres. Host Nathan Anderson talked about why he decided to grow small grains and some of the more practical aspects of growing wheat.

some of that summer heat into late-season forage for his cattle.

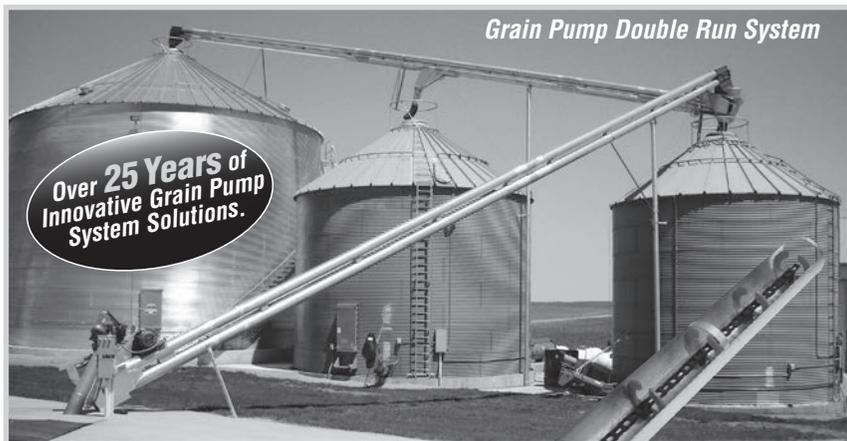
■ **Improve the soil.** While small grains themselves have a different rooting system than corn and soybeans, the diverse cover crop mix Anderson will plant after harvesting his wheat will inject roots of different sizes into different depths of the soil, creating pathways for air and water movement, as well as beneficial soil organisms like earthworms.

■ **Diversify weed and pest management.** Because small grains germinate and grow at cooler temperatures, they can suppress a different set of weeds than corn and soybeans. Using different methods to control weeds reduces the need for herbicides. Liebman's research also shows that diverse crop rotations help control sudden death syndrome in soybeans.

■ **Strengthen Iowa.** "We have a responsibility to care for our natural resources to safeguard current and future productivity of agriculture in our state," said Anderson. "We can do that by diversifying our farms — incorporating small grains [and] cover crops, and integrating livestock back into our cropping systems. More diversity on farms across the landscape is something that can help us as a state." He believes a more diverse farm economy will be more resilient, and better to absorb shocks from volatile markets and weather.

Ohde writes for PFI in Ames.

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