

# Cover crop demo program takes off



*A Traverse County producer who enrolled land in Traverse SWCD's cover crop demonstration program planted cereal rye into a soybean crop.*

**Photo Credits:** Traverse SWCD

## Traverse SWCD exceeds first-year signup goal, working with seven producers to implement cover crops through BWSR grant-supported work



Traverse Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) exceeded its first-year goal for a new cover crop demonstration program by nearly 200 acres.

By July 2020, SWCD staff had worked with seven producers to enroll 788 acres in the new program. Traverse SWCD aims to enroll 600 acres per year in cover crops for three years total, with at least 200 acres per year located in Drinking Water Supply Management Areas (DWSMAs). The total enrollment goal is 1,800 acres. So far, 304 of the 788 enrolled acres are in DWSMAs.

The grant period runs for five years. Participating landowners are required to plant cover crops for three out of the next five years; this offers them the flexibility to plant during years with favorable conditions.

“We opted for a five-year (grant) agreement in the event the weather wasn’t conducive for planting cover crops on a given year, to allow the producers some flexibility,” said Sara Gronfeld, Traverse SWCD manager.

Traverse SWCD was one of five SWCDs to receive a Cover Crop Demonstration grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in December 2019. A total of \$1 million was awarded to five SWCDs — Traverse, East Otter Tail, Stearns County, Faribault and Root River — to increase cover crops in key areas of the state. Grants ranged from \$125,000 to \$250,000, with each SWCD developing its own plan. SWCD staff members work with landowners to provide per-acre financial incentives and technical assistance.

“ No matter what Mother Nature throws at us, we still want to plant a cover crop. ”

— Bruce Johnson, Traverse SWCD technical manager

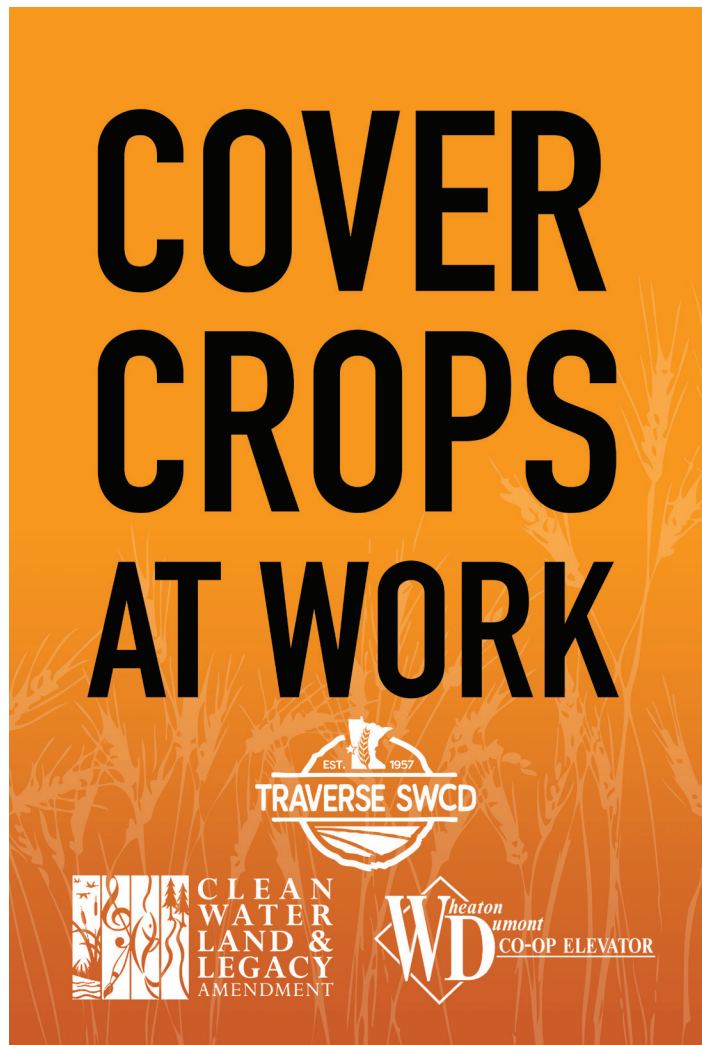
In addition to the \$125,000 grant from BWSR, Traverse SWCD leveraged \$12,500 from Wheaton Dumont Co-op Elevator to launch the cover crop program, which offers \$38 per acre payments to landowners who try cover crops. The SWCD opened enrollment in spring 2020.

“We’re over all our goals,” said Bruce Johnson, Traverse SWCD technical manager. “I hope we get to a point where our producers in Traverse County make cover crops a part of their system.”

By keeping a living plant aboveground and roots belowground for much of the year, cover crops can greatly reduce erosion and runoff while increasing infiltration. Cover crops increase soil organic matter, which can improve soil health and increase water retention.

Cover crops can scavenge excess nitrogen and phosphorus, reducing how much infiltrates into groundwater, and potentially increasing the nutrients available for the next cash crop. Certain cover crops can reduce the amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed, potentially lowering production costs. In addition, cover crops can provide more forage for livestock and food sources for beneficial insects and pollinators.

“I think cover crops are the way of the future, but



*This sign is displayed on land enrolled in the cover crop program.*

we need to change the mentality of how we do things,” Johnson said.

Johnson obtained Job Approval Authority in 2020 for cover crops to better assist landowners looking to explore soil health practices through the demonstration grant. The certification allows him to sign off on cost-share contracts and provide technical assistance

to producers.

While cover crops offer soil health benefits, barriers exist for new adopters. Successful establishment depends on many variables: sufficient rain after planting, adequate seed-to-soil contact, and favorable interaction with the standing crop. Costs associated with establishing cover crops can also be a significant hurdle.

“That producer still has to feel 100% comfortable with what they’re doing. I have no money in the game, but producers do — they are taking a risk,” Johnson said.

Despite early successes, the ongoing drought has created challenges for the new program. Johnson said producers are reluctant to invest in cover crop seeds and equipment rental this year because of concerns that the crops won’t take due to lack of rainfall. Johnson said the SWCD’s flexible program, which requires landowners to plant cover crops in three out of five years rather than annually, makes it easier to adapt to circumstances such as a drought.

“No matter what Mother Nature throws at us, we still want to plant a cover crop,” Johnson said. “Having this much adversity in the first year is a challenge.”

In addition to offering \$38 per-acre payments, the program provides technical assistance through online trainings. Four WebEx trainings this spring featured producers, State Soil Health Specialist Anna Cates, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service staff and University of Minnesota staff. Promotional efforts include signs indicating enrolled fields, targeted mailings, and several informational meetings targeting producers.