



Helping People Help the Land

Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

July/August 2019

Cover Crops Help Make the Best of a Bad Planting Season

It's hard not to notice that 2019 wasn't a typical planting season in northern Eaton County. When driving past farm fields around Sunfield and Grand Ledge there are numerous unplanted fields, some are overgrown with weeds, others were tilled and treated with herbicides and some are planted with cover crops.

"I've been farming for 39 years and this was the worst I've ever seen by far," said Ken Merryfield about this year's planting conditions. This year was the first time Merryfield did not get all of his crops planted, he said.

Merryfield and his son Shane planted all but 500 acres of corn and beans before the rain started and prevented them from getting into their fields for 22 days. He chose to submit a crop insurance claim on his unplanted acres. "I would much rather have had a crop planted that put an insurance claim in," Merryfield said. After filing his first insurance claim for prevented planting acres, he did something else for the first time, Merryfield planted a cover crop.

We were always interested in cover crops but we never had time for it, said Shane. The Merryfields signed up for financial assistance in planting their cover crop after a disaster initiative was announced by NRCS-Michigan in July. During the second half of July, they broadcast seeded a mixture of winter wheat and clover and then incorporated it using a vertical tillage tool. It took some time for the cover crop to emerge because of dry weather but by the end of August their fields were green.

A few miles east of the Merryfields, Jeff Smith



Eaton County farmer Jeff Smith (above) holds a radish planted as part of a cover crop mixture on a field that went unplanted due to wet planting conditions.

planted about 40 acres of cover crops, also utilizing financial assistance through the NRCS disaster initiative. The land was covered in water well into June, said Smith. "There was not much of a chance of making any money by planting it, I wasn't interested in growing 150-bushel corn."

Smith had planted cover crops before but with funding provided through the disaster initiative he decided to do more. He planted a cover crop mixture including radish, oats, cover and sunflower. "It's the

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United States Department of Agriculture

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Farm Bill Expands Mission of Ag Mediation Program

Michigan farmers can now mediate a wide range of disputes at no cost through the Michigan Agricultural Mediation Program thanks to the 2018 Farm Bill. The bill enables the MAMP to mediate agricultural issues involving leases, farm transitions, organic certification, next-door neighbors and more.

The MAMP helps the farm community resolve disagreements without resorting to costly adversarial hearings and court proceedings. Launched in 1997, it is part of the USDA's State Certified Mediation Program, which Congress established in 1987 to help farmers and lenders face stressful economic conditions.

Before passage of the farm bill last December, the MAMP could only mediate cases involving USDA programs or loans. The MAMP still mediates those issues but now can mediate more.

For example, families passing the farm to the next generation may find mediation helpful if disagreements arise among family members. A tiff with a neighbor may best be mediated to keep the peace. Lease transactions can be mediated to keep payments manageable or the lease in force.

Farmers in Michigan and across the country face declining incomes, late plantings, and increased

stress. Unresolved conflicts can end up in court and cause farmers to miss critical planting or harvest windows, lose farm property or be denied operating loans.

"It's important to address these issues early before parties set hard and fast positions," says MAMP Director David Gruber. "Mediation provides a confidential forum in which they can explore options that sometimes can save the farm."

Mediation enables participants to talk informally and openly about the issues. A trained, impartial mediator helps the participants build trust, focus on the issues, and generate options. The participants, not the mediator, decide the case. If they find a solution that they both can accept and complies with the law, they sign a written binding agreement.

In recent years, 85 percent of MAMP cases have reached agreement. Even when formal agreements are not possible, participants often gain a better understanding of the issues and their options going forward.

To request free mediation or for more information, call 800/616-7863 or go online at www.agmediation.org. All calls are confidential.



**AGRICULTURAL
MEDIATION
PROGRAM**

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Doing the Right Thing

gaps. I have my doubts, but foresters tend to be optimists, and they are comfortable with waiting many years for results to take hold.

With the encouragement from clouds of mosquitoes and black flies, I got back into the car. We continued to slowly drive down the seasonal county road, marveling at the skillful forest management. Blue boundary paint marked the lines between harvested areas and blocks that were not to be harvested, although post-harvest, the boundaries were quite apparent without the blue paint. No paint marks

within those dense stands. Probably different forestowners, and rather unfortunate for the trees and associated suites of wildlife.

"Doing the right thing" has much to do with defining "right". In this case, it's all about correcting mistakes of the past and providing as many benefits to people, forests, and wildlife as possible. Then, "doing" begins with making a decision. Sometimes, this is the hardest part.

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