

GROWING INTEREST

Local interest in cover crops continue to grow

by MIKE JORDAN
Staff Writer

Local interest in cover crops continues to grow.

More than 30 people — area farmers among them — attended a field day on the use of cover crops at the Jerry and Nancy Ackermann farm west of Lakefield last week. Those in attendance were able to inspect firsthand the Ackermanns' 37-acre cover crop demonstration site and learn of the benefits cover crops can deliver not only to producers, but also to the watershed.

Proven benefits

A helicopter aerially seeded purple top turnips, tillage radish and cereal rye into standing corn and soybeans on the Ackermann farm in West Heron Lake Township on Aug. 26. The trial was funded to the tune of nearly \$6,650 by the North Central Region-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Farmer Rancher Program through the Heron Lake Watershed District, in partnership with the Ackermanns and Lakefield-based Extended Ag Services.

Last Wednesday, Jill Sackett, extension education conservation agronomist with the University of Minnesota Extension-Rural Advantage, explained to those gathered the benefits of cover crops.

"Why cover crops?" Sackett asked. "Because research shows that cover crops are very good in helping with weed issues and have additional benefits for farmers, as well as the watershed they are located within."

Take cereal rye for example, Sackett said, a cover crop that emits a chemical that helps control weeds, but does not affect row crops or other plants. It does not create problems with corn or soybeans in particular, she added.

Beyond weed control, cover crops also contribute to soil salinity reduction, Sackett said, as well as reduced soil erosion and, in the case of tillage radish, reduction in soil compaction.

In the Ackermanns' situation, their demonstration plot is located directly adjacent to Jackson County Judicial Ditch 3, directly to the north and east of their farmstead and grove. Their use of cover crops in that area will help with water quality by increasing nutrient uptake and reducing erosion into the ditch while minimizing nutrient leaching, Sackett said.

Interest growing

Local farmers who attended last Wednesday's field day came away impressed.

Former Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist Joel Poppe, who farms north of Lakefield, said cover crops have a bright future in Jackson County.

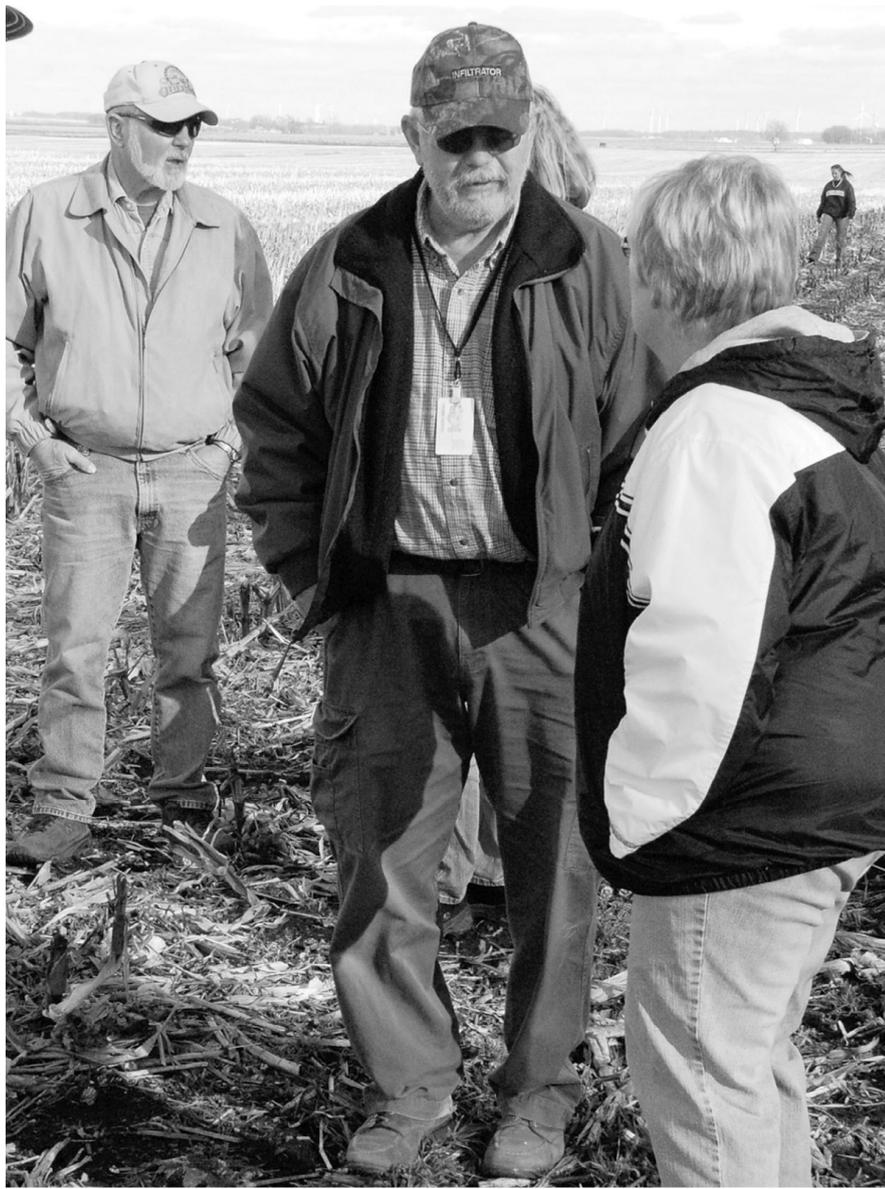
"I think the concept is good," he said. "I admire Jerry and his neighbors out there for trying something new, doing something with those cover crops and learning how to do it. It is a concept that will work. Will it work in every situation? Probably not — just like in any other farming management situation. Not everybody can make it work."

Lakefield area farmer John Nauerth III agreed.

"I want to give the Ackermanns a tremendous amount of credit for trying something innovative and working with this," he said. "I think everybody involved with this deserves a tip of the hat or pat on the back. I don't know if the cover crops will work for everybody, but without these kinds of projects and the dedication they put into it, how are you going to know? Maybe a guy could use those tillage radishes on areas that are compacted on their farm."

Jan Voit, executive director of the HLWD, said she is always looking for ways to provide residents with information about practices and technology that will help with water pollution reduction.

"The field day was a great chance to gain firsthand knowledge about the benefits of cover crops," she said. "Jerry and Nancy are great cooperators. The working relationship with them and with Extended Ag has been wonderful."



Photos by Mike Jordan

Al Langseth, Nobles County feedlot officer, and Nancy Ackermann talk it over as those attending the cover crop field day at the Ackermann farm west of Lakefield take a look at the emerging cover crops of cereal rye, tillage radish and purple top turnips among the corn stubble last Wednesday.



Jill Sackett, extension education conservation agronomist with the University of Minnesota Extension's Rural Advantage, presents information on cover crops, drawing on her experience over the past three years helping area farmers plant a variety of the crops, including cereal rye, tillage radish and purple top turnips.



Lakefield area farmers Joel Poppe (left) and Brian Post talk about the cover crops on the Jerry and Nancy Ackermann farm west of Lakefield.