

## Cover crops: 'Oops' leads to learning

BY JANET KUBAT WILLETTE

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BYRON, Minn. — A thick mat of rye covers the ground in the soybean field, sort of like straw between rows in a strawberry patch.

Curt Tvedt, who grows and sells forage crops, intended to harvest the rye as a spring forage, planting it in September.

The rye was ready to harvest this spring, but he couldn't get in the field because it was too wet. In about a week and a half, the rye had passed prime harvest stage, and its digestibility dropped. It went from knee to shoulder high. Tvedt didn't have a market for the rye and didn't know what to do with it. He figured the rye that stood 4 to 5 feet tall across the 35-acre field would have yielded 400 round bales.

His friend, Gary 'Curly' Brannan, suggested he no-till soybeans into the rye and lined up Tom Besch to do the planting.

Besch took a video of the planting on his smartphone, sharing it at a July 27 field day attended by more than 40 people. The rye laid down in his wheel tracks, otherwise it stood tall. Besch said if it wasn't for GPS he wouldn't have been able to plant the field.

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He used a Kinze planter with the trash whippers and coulters removed to plant the Gold Country soybeans with a 1.5 maturity on June 3. He had to stop twice to remove the rye that wrapped around the closing wheels, but 80 to 90 percent of the soybeans went in the ground very nicely, Besch said. The rye was rolled the same day.

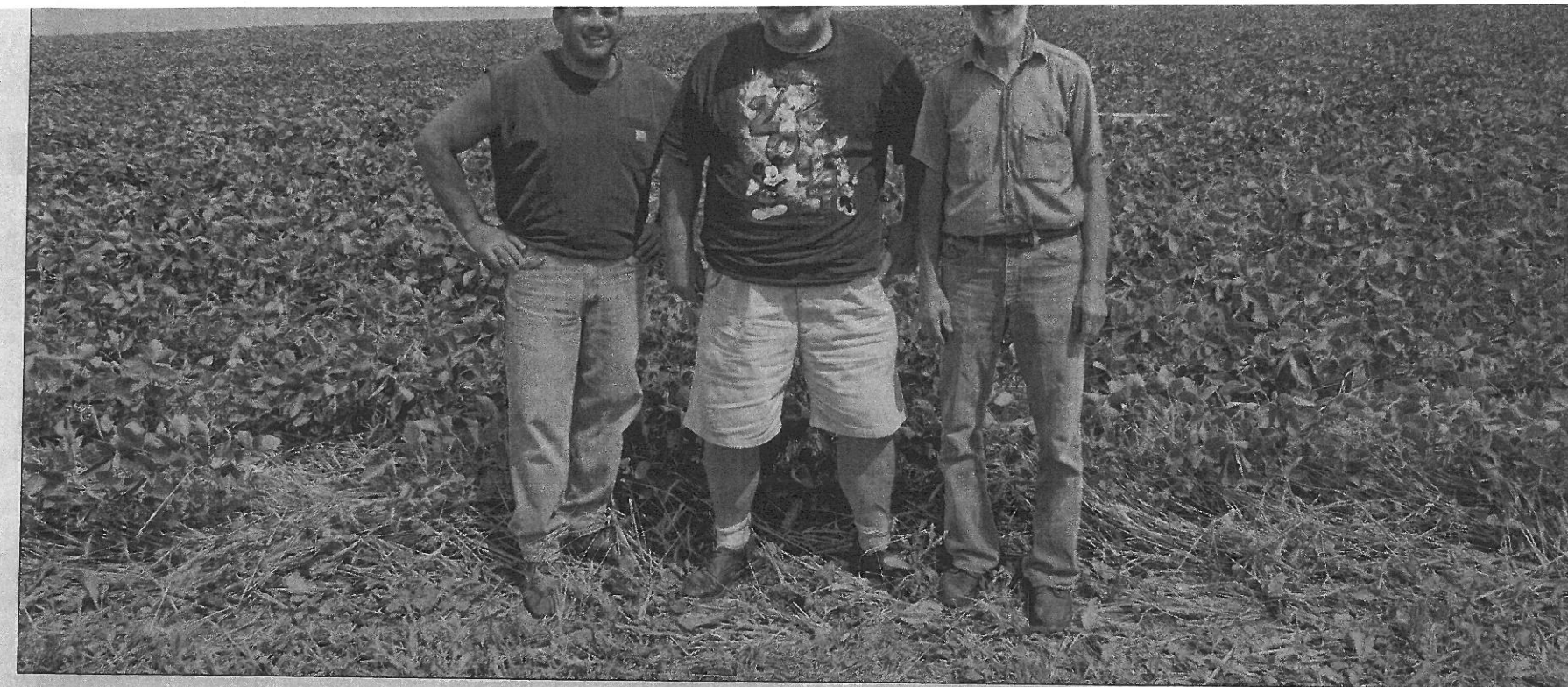
The soybeans were planted at 140,000 seeds per acre and struggled to emerge from the thick mat, Tvedt said. The rye, which was flowering when the soybeans were planted, was sprayed with glyphosate on June 23.

On July 27, the soybeans were flowering and stood about knee high.

## Experimenting

Tvedt, 72, said he plans to devote the rest of his farming career to research and education. He has watched 200 to 300 hours of podcasts on cover crops and said farmers in the Piedmont Region of North Carolina have had success with interceding into standing rye.

He's part of the Land Stewardship Project Cover Crop Network and shared his dilemma with other cover croppers.



Caroline van Schaik of the Land Stewardship Project thanked Tvedt and Loren Donovan, who also hosted a field day, for being brave enough to share their oops and hosting field days.

"They are trying to keep their soil covered and they are brave enough to

do it in plain sight," van Schaik said.

They are doing their own research and trying things to see if they work, she said.

Tvedt's unexpected experiment demonstrates how critical timing is in cover crops, said University of Minnesota Extension educator Jim

**ABOVE: Tom Besch, Curt Tvedt and Gary "Curly" Brannan collaborated to plant soybeans into rye stubble. Tvedt, who has owned the property since 1976, said the beans wouldn't have been planted without the help of Besch and Brannan. Brannan had the idea, and Besch was the planter. LEFT: Tom Besch planted soybeans into standing rye on June 3 on this field owned by Curt Tvedt. Tvedt had intended to harvest the rye as forage, but it got too tall.**

Photos by Janet Kubat Willette / Agri News

Paulson. Not only is planting time critical in the fall, but also termination or harvest time in the spring.

"I wasn't planning on planting beans," Tvedt said.

## Try to plan

Determine what you want to do with the cover crop before planting, Paulson said. For the past couple

years, he has tended test plots with 30 different kinds of cover crops. He likes some combinations and said it typically costs \$10 to \$15 per acre to plant and another \$15 for seeds.

There is value in incorporating cover crops into the system, Paulson said.

Remember that prairies were built as much on what grew above the soil as what grew below, he said.

Tvedt encouraged attendees to grab a spade, go into the field and dig to see what the soil looks like. He wants soil that looks like coffee grounds and is home to earthworms.

Earthworms create an elevator shaft through the soil that increases its water holding capacity. Tillage cuts those shafts, so earthworms have to create new shafts.

Make sure to talk to your crop insurance agent before planting cover crops, Paulson said. Also, the Natural Resources Conservation Service has programs to help defray the cost of planting cover crops.