

Cover crops: 'We're really learning'

BY JANET KUBAT WILLETTE

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LEWISTON — About 30 people gathered around the tables in the downtown Lewiston office of the Land Stewardship Project to share their cover crop experiences.

As big flakes of wet snow fell softly outside, farmers told of planting winter rye, oats, hairy vetch, radish, clover and peas.

Curt Tvedt, who grows and sells forage crops, said his soybeans that were planted into standing rye on June 3 yielded 50 bushels per acre. Tvedt said he learned much, as he doesn't typically grow soybeans. A neighbor told him he needed to spray for aphids and the person who combined suggested he try an earlier maturing soybean. The soybeans planted had a 1.5 maturity and several green beans when harvested.

Tvedt said the field was a curiosity in the neighborhood as people stopped nearly every day to inspect the soybeans.

He's not sure what he's going to plant in the field next year. Some suggested another year of soybeans.

Over coffee, cider and cookies, farmers asked questions and spoke of what worked and what didn't with cover crops.

"We're really learning," said Dan Nath, soil scientist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, but there's a lot of unknowns.

The knowledge of using cover crops has been lost as farmers focused on planting two crops, he said. Now, a segment of farmers are trying to once again discover the science of planting multiple crops.

Tvedt shared a 1951 book, "Forages," given to him at church. He's read most of the book and bookmarked a few pages for reference.

Jim Paulson, a University of Minnesota Extension educator, suggested farmers new to cover crops start small. Rye is a popular cover crop, he said, as it starts easy and survives well. Be aware it needs to be managed in the spring. It also offers autotoxicity.

Interseeding sounds fantastic, a participant said, but not all cover crops are shade tolerant. Also, be aware of crop insurance regulations and landowner concerns regarding cover crops.

If farmers spend \$35 per acre to plant a cover crop, they need to consider what they reap for the investment.

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