The Perfect Pairing
Grazing cover crops gives an immediate payback.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LYNN BETTS

Most crop farmers expect cover crops to serve as a long-term payback from a short-term cost. But, that’s not the case with farmers who graze cover crops, says Meghan Filbert, livestock coordinator with the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI).

“They see an immediate return on a cover-crop investment,” she explains. “Winter feed for cattle is the largest cost in any cattle operation—grazing cover crops saves them from having to buy or grow hay.”

Feed for cattle was part of Wes and Dennis Degner’s thinking when they first tried cover crops on 65 acres in their operation, near Lytton, in eastern Sac County, Iowa. “We were hoping to save soil, nutrients and fertilizer on our cropland, but we also wanted to save on feed costs for the cows,” Wes says.

The Degners harvest high-moisture corn early and then drill cereal rye into cornstalks late in September. They’ve tried seeding by plane into growing corn, scattering rye seed with fertilizer and incorporating rye with fertilizer. They’ve had success with each method. The rye grows so quickly, they can graze cover crops and cornstalks from mid-October up to late November.

TRIM THE FEED BILL. “That’s 45 days we don’t have to feed cows,” Wes says. “I did the math and think we saved $3,000 a year in feed costs for those 31 head of cows on 65 acres.”

The father and son team has expanded cover crops to blanket 285 acres during the past few years. “I was shocked at how green the corn was during last summer’s [2017] dry weather in fields following cover crops,” Dennis says. “I think we’re getting some slower release of nitrogen with our cover crops. Another surprise was the amount of rye roots in the soil and the lack of compaction from cattle out in the fields,” Dennis says. “It was easy to put a spade into the ground.”

The Degners are part of a small group of farmers in Sac, Calhoun, Carroll, Greene and Sioux counties participating in a study to estimate the economic benefits of grazing cover crops. PFI’s Filbert is looking primarily at cereal rye, but oats, turnips (forage brassicas), rapeseed, radishes and forage kale are also included in the group’s project, supported by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

CUT COMPACTION. Mark Schlesisman, Lake City, Iowa, grows covers on about 1,000 acres, and he can see the difference. “The roots of cover crops really work against compaction. The fields I graze turn out to be my best-looking crop fields,” he says.

An Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) first nudged the producer to try covers. To receive financial incentives through the program, he had to continue adding different cover-crop species to the mix.

Schlesisman likes fall grazing because cattle can dine on those brassicas that tend not to overwinter. In the fall of 2016, his best 150-acre cover-crop field yielded 570 tons of dry matter, saving him nearly $300 an acre compared to buying hay.

He also gets excited about the increased carrying capacity afforded by the cover crops. “Dad ran 200 cow-calf pairs on the same acres that we now run 360 pairs on,” he says. “Because we can graze and feed cover crops, we’re producing more on the same amount of land.”
DIRECT PAYBACK. Matt Schuiteman, Sioux Center, Iowa, has been experimenting with grazing, baling and growing cover crops for seed for a little more than 10 years. "A lot of the talk about cover crops is about soil conservation and soil health," he notes.

"For me, what's practical about cover crops is the direct payback you get when you put them through cattle," he says. "We get four months or a little more grazing from seed rye and fall rye together. If you've got a cow out grazing rye, you're not feeding that cow in a dry lot."

Schuiteman calculates feed value of a rye cover crop to his 40-50 cattle to be about $281 an acre.

WINTER GRAZING. After seven years of grazing cover crops, Kurt Stiefvater, a McCook County, South Dakota, corn, soybean, oats and cattle producer, finds he gets more grazing in the winter. The feed value is also higher than he anticipated. He's in a three-crop rotation of corn, soybean and oats on 1,500 acres. Planting cover crops into the oat stubble allows him to extend the grazing season and add diversity.

"We calve in mid-May and wean in December, so our calves also get a little grazing when we turn in about mid-November," he says. His rotationally grazed cover crops provide feed for 140 head of Black Angus, Red Angus and Simmental cows through February.

Stiefvater experiments with cover-crop mixes each year. Last year, he used a mix of oats, barley, radish, rapeseed, turnips, okra and sorghum-sudangrass that reached 2 to 3 feet in height by the time he turned cows in. "The tonnage I get is really good," he says. "We've had some heavy winter snows, but where there's feed, the cows will find it."

He adds, "The cover crops ensure we're not going to run out of pasture, and we figure we need 30% less hay."

The benefits from extending the grazing season accrue to the land, as well.

"After 20 years of no-till and the more recent use of cover crops and oats in the rotation, the soil is definitely more mellow. We get better water infiltration, and our organic matter levels are higher now," he adds.

"There's just a very good synergy between cattle and cover crops."