

News Release: SWCD Promotes Cover Crops Cost-Share Program

In the spring of 2017, the Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District (District) offered up 20 dollars an acre, up to 40 acres, in cost share, on a first come first serve basis to assist in the application cost of cover crops. The amount of applicants was staggering and the District had spent all 5,000 dollars of the cost share fund within the first week of a two week sign up period. The applicants selected were: Larry Meisner of Raymond, David Warren of Oconee, Mark Schweizer of Nokomis, Brian Lewey of Hillsboro, Tom Anderson of Butler, and Steve Janssen of Fillmore.

When the decision was made to re-allocate \$5000 of the District's Operations funds into Cost Share fund, the conversation quick went to the topic of a Cover Crop Cost sharing program. While in the grand scheme of things, \$5000 isn't that much, the District had an "every little bit helps" approach. Consideration was given to other erosion reducing/capturing practices, but felt that the money would go the furthest in a cover crop cost share fund.

The idea of cover crops have existed in some form or another for decades. Cover Crops have a wide variety of applications in the field depending of the intended effect. Probably the most basic idea behind planting cover crops is to provide the earth some cover during times of the year when commodity crops aren't in the field. However, the effects of cover crops extend deeper than that. The use of cover crops can provide valuable organic matter, or break hardpans that at some level within the soil. In some cases, cover crops can even be grazed, to provide a valuable winter forage for livestock.

As the Board of Directors, and staff of the District look forward to potentially having another Cover Crop Cost Share Sign-Up in 2018, a revamping of funding criteria may be in order. While none of the criteria is set in stone, the District felt that potentially prioritizing first time cover crop users, as well as land owners within Montgomery County's lake watersheds should be given consideration. All of this is dependent on the amount of funding the State of Illinois releases to the districts.

The Secondary Effects

While it appears at face value that District prioritizes agricultural based practices, our roots run deeper than that. Most of the practices that we would like to see employed do happen on the farm/farmer level, but another very intentional effect of these practices can be seen in the lakes and their tributaries located in Montgomery County.

Practices like Cover Crops, No Till Cropping Systems, Filter Strips, and Stream Bank Stabilization Projects are great tools to help farmers keep the soil and applied nutrients on the farm, and by extension, out of our local streams, creeks, and lakes. These practices address the issue of runoff, which can be created by conventional tillage systems. Keeping soil and fertilizer runoff to a minimum not only promotes a healthy native ecosystem, but can also create a more aesthetically pleasing environment for all kinds of lake goers. Using these and other practices,

can not only limit the amount of runoff a farm produces, but in the long run can increase soil health and ultimately make the soil more productive.

Most people are aware of the ongoing hypoxia event happening in the Gulf of Mexico, and are of the opinion that something needs to be done on a national level. However, curtailing the scope of the hypoxia event is ultimately something that happens on a farm level, and farmers are acutely aware of this. Farmers in the Midwest are learning from their counterparts in the Chesapeake Bay region of the East Coast, who are subject to regulations that mandate what practices must be done on their farms. As farmers, we have a responsibility to take care of the land. Most farmers understand that it would be easier to implement these practices voluntarily, rather than being forced to through legislation.