NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

COVER CROP

(Ac.)

CODE 340

DEFINITION

Crops including grasses, legumes, and forbs for seasonal cover and other conservation purposes.

PURPOSE

- Reduce erosion from wind and water.
- Increase soil organic matter content.
- Capture and recycle or redistribute nutrients in the soil profile.
- Promote biological nitrogen fixation and reduce energy use.
- Increase biodiversity.
- Suppress Weeds.
- Manage soil moisture.
- Minimize and reduce soil compaction.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

All lands requiring vegetative cover for natural resource protection and or improvement.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Cover crop plant materials, seedbed preparation, seeding rates, seeding dates, seeding depths, fertility requirements, and planting methods shall be consistent with approved local vegetation establishment criteria and local site conditions.

Cover crop plant materials and establishment timing shall be compatible with other components of the planned crop rotation and management system.

Herbicides used to manage cover crops shall be compatible with establishment and growth of the following planned crops in rotation.

The selected cover crop plant materials shall not include plant species listed in South Dakota as noxious or invasive weeds.

Cover crop residues shall not be burned.

In addition to other criteria for non-irrigated cover crop termination, the cover crop termination must be at or before the time periods specified in Attachment A.

Additional Criteria to Reduce Erosion from Wind and Water

Cover crop establishment, in conjunction with other conservation practices, shall be planned to adequately protect the soil during planned critical soil erosion period(s)

Cover crop plant materials shall have physical plant characteristics and growth habits to reduce soil erosion to the planned soil loss objective.

The amount and timing of cover crop residues and/or canopy cover that is necessary to meet the planned soil loss objective shall be determined using current Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) approved soil erosion prediction technology.

Additional Criteria to Increase Soil Organic Matter Content

Cover crop plant materials shall be selected and managed to provide the amounts of above ground and root biomass to maintain a positive trend in the soil organic matter subfactor using the NRCS Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) procedure.

Cover crops shall be planted and established as early as possible and terminated as late as possible to maximize biomass production, the time needed to prepare the field for planting the next crop, and soil moisture depletion.

Additional Criteria to Capture and Recycle Excess Nutrients in the Soil Profile

Cover crops shall be established and actively growing prior to expected period(s) of increased nutrient leaching potential.

Cover crop plant materials shall be selected based on their ability to take up and utilize large amounts of residual nutrients from the soil profile.

A nutrient budget, as defined in Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) Nutrient Management (590), shall be prepared for each cover crop interval in the rotation to manage residual nutrients in the soil profile, nutrient sources and amounts supplied to the cover crop and the planned nutrient uptake amounts by the cover crop.

Terminate the cover crop as late as feasible to maximize plant biomass production and nutrient uptake, considering crop insurance criteria, the time needed to prepare the field for planting the next crop, and soil moisture depletion.

Additional Criteria to Promote Biological Nitrogen Fixation and Reduce Energy Use

Cover crop plant materials shall be legumes or legume grass mixtures.

Cover Crop legume seed shall be supplied with appropriate Rhizobium inoculant currently in the soil or placed with the seed at time of planting to insure proper root nodule formation and function.

Nitrogen source material application rates shall be adjusted to account for available Nitrogen supplied by the growing legumes and the residual Nitrogen credit for the following crop in rotation.

Established cover crop stand densities shall consist of no less than 50 percent legume species

Additional Criteria to Increase Biodiversity

Select cover crop plant materials to achieve one or more of the following:

- different maturity dates
- attract beneficial insects
- attract pollinator species
- increase the soil biological diversity
- serve as an insect trap crop
- provide food and cover for wildlife

Additional Criteria for Weed Suppression

Cover crop plant materials shall be selected based on their chemical or physical characteristics to compete with and/or suppress weed populations.

Seeding rate, method and timing shall be adjusted as needed to encourage dense stands and rapid canopy development to suppress weed growth and reduce the reliance on chemical suppression techniques.

Noxious or invasive weed populations shall be managed before and during the cover crop-crop interval.

Cover crop residues shall be left on the soil surface as a non-chemical suppression technique to management weed populations.

For long-term weed suppression, reseeding annuals and/or biennial species can be used prior to the following crop in rotation.

Additional Criteria for Soil Moisture Management

Termination of the cover crop shall be timed sufficiently early to conserve soil moisture for the following crop's germination and growth needs.

Cover crop residues shall be left on the soil surface when soil moisture conservation for the following crop is an objective.

In areas of potential excess soil moisture, delay termination as long as possible to allow the cover crop to grow and maximize the amount of soil moisture removed.

Additional Criteria to Minimize and Reduce Soil Compaction

Cover crop plant materials shall be selected and managed to produce deep root growth and large amounts of surface and/or root biomass to improve soil organic matter, soil structure and water infiltration for improved crop root growth in the soil profile.

CONSIDERATIONS

Plant cover crops in a timely matter to establish a good stand.

When applicable, ensure cover crops are managed and are compatible with the client's crop insurance criteria.

Maintain an actively growing cover crop as late as feasible to maximize plant growth, allowing time to prepare the field for the next crop and moisture depletion.

When used to redistribute nutrients from deeper in the profile up to the surface layer, consider killing of the cover crop in relation to the planting date of the following crop.

If the objective is to best synchronize the use of cover crop as a green manure to cycle nutrients, factors such as the carbon/nitrogen ratios may be considered to terminate cover crop early and have a faster mineralization of nutrients to match release of nutrients with nutrient uptake of the following crop in rotation.

The right time to terminate a cover crop will depend on the specific rotation, weather, and grower objectives.

Use deep-rooted species to maximize nutrient recovery.

Use grasses to utilize more soil nitrogen, and legumes to utilize both Nitrogen and phosphorus.

Avoid cover crop species that harbor or carryover potentially damaging diseases or insects.

For most CPS Cover Crop (340) purposes, for which cover crops are established, the desirable combined canopy and surface cover is 90 percent or greater and the above ground (dry weight) biomass production is at least 4,000 pounds/acre.

Cover crops may be used to improve site conditions for establishment of perennial crops species during the crop rotation.

Use plant species that enhance bio-fuels opportunities.

Use plant species that enhance forage opportunities for pollinators by using diverse legumes and other forbs.

Use a diverse cover crop mixture of two or more species to address multiple purposes.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Plans and specifications shall be prepared for each conservation management unit (CMU).

Specifications for the establishment and management of cover crops shall include:

- CMU/Field identification and treatment acres
- Plant materials to be established and managed as cover crops
- Seeding and establishment methods, dates, and rates.
- The field operation "management record" from RUSLE2 or WEPS for the crop rotation that includes cover crops
- Planned rates, methods, and timing of nutrient and pesticide applications.
- Planned dates and method for terminating the cover crop.
- Other information pertinent to establishing and managing the cover crop.

Plan specifications shall be recorded using approved conservation practice specification sheets and additional Documentation Requirements (SD-DR-340) for this conservation practice.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Manage growth of the cover crop to reduce competition from volunteer plants and shading.

Manage weeds in cover crops by mowing or other suppression pest management techniques.

Manage soil moisture depletion by selecting water efficient plant materials and terminating the cover crop before excessive evapo-transpiration occurs.

Evaluate the cover crop management as part of the crop rotation to determine if the conservation practice purposes and client objectives are met.

When the cover crop system is not meeting the planned purpose(s) or client objectives, adjust the cover crop timing, plant material mix and management techniques as needed and document with an updated CPS Cover Crop (340) Job Sheet.

REFERENCES

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Reeves, D.W. 1994. Cover crops and erosion. p. 125-172 *In* J.L. Hatfield and B.A. Stewart (eds.) Crops Residue Management. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL.

USDA-NRCS, National Agronomy Manual, M_190_NAM_500 - Fourth Edition - March 2011.

USDA-NRCS, National Planning Procedures Handbook, H_180_600_TOC - Amend. 5 - February 2010.

USDA-NRCS, Agronomy Technical Note No. 16: Cover Crop Technology in South Dakota (SD). SD FOTG Section I.

See Attachment A: NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines Non-Irrigated Cropland.

Attachment A

NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines

December 2013

Cover crops on a field in Black Hawk County, Iowa.
Photo: Lynn Betts, NRCS

Background:

To ensure that USDA policies are coordinated and up to date with evolving cover crop practices, the administrators of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Risk Management Agency (RMA) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) organized an interagency workgroup to develop consistent, simple and flexible policy across the three agencies. National and local experts, along with multiple stakeholders, were involved in the process. Research literature, plant growth and soil hydrology models, and input from national/local experts in cover crop management provided the basis for developing cover crop termination guidelines to achieve their conservation benefits while minimizing risk of reducing yield to the following crop due to soil water use.

The guidelines apply to non-irrigated cropland, including systems that contain a fallow period. Termination of cover crops utilized in an irrigated cropping system is not restricted to a given cover crop termination zone. Cover Crops in irrigated cropping systems should be terminated based on the crop system and conservation purpose, but before the planted crop emerges.
**See map on page 2.*

NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines for Management Zones

Zone 1 - See Map	Zone 2 - See Map	Zone 3 - See Map	Zone 4 - See Map
NRCS Cover Crop Termination Period Guidance - Non-Irrigated Cropland:			
For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops - Terminate cover crops 35 days or earlier prior to planting the crop. **For Early Spring Seeded Crops** - Terminate - cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. (Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8)	**For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops** - Terminate cover crops 15 days or earlier prior to planting the crop. **For Early Spring Seeded Crops** Terminate - cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. (Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8)	Terminate cover crop at or before planting the crop.	Terminate cover crop at or within 5 days after planting, but before crop emergence.
RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice * For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting. * For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.	**RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice** * For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting. * For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.	**RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice** * For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting. * For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.	

Note: These guidelines can be used as a stand alone document, if needed.

* Cover Crop Termination Zones

Produced by: NRCS | ESD
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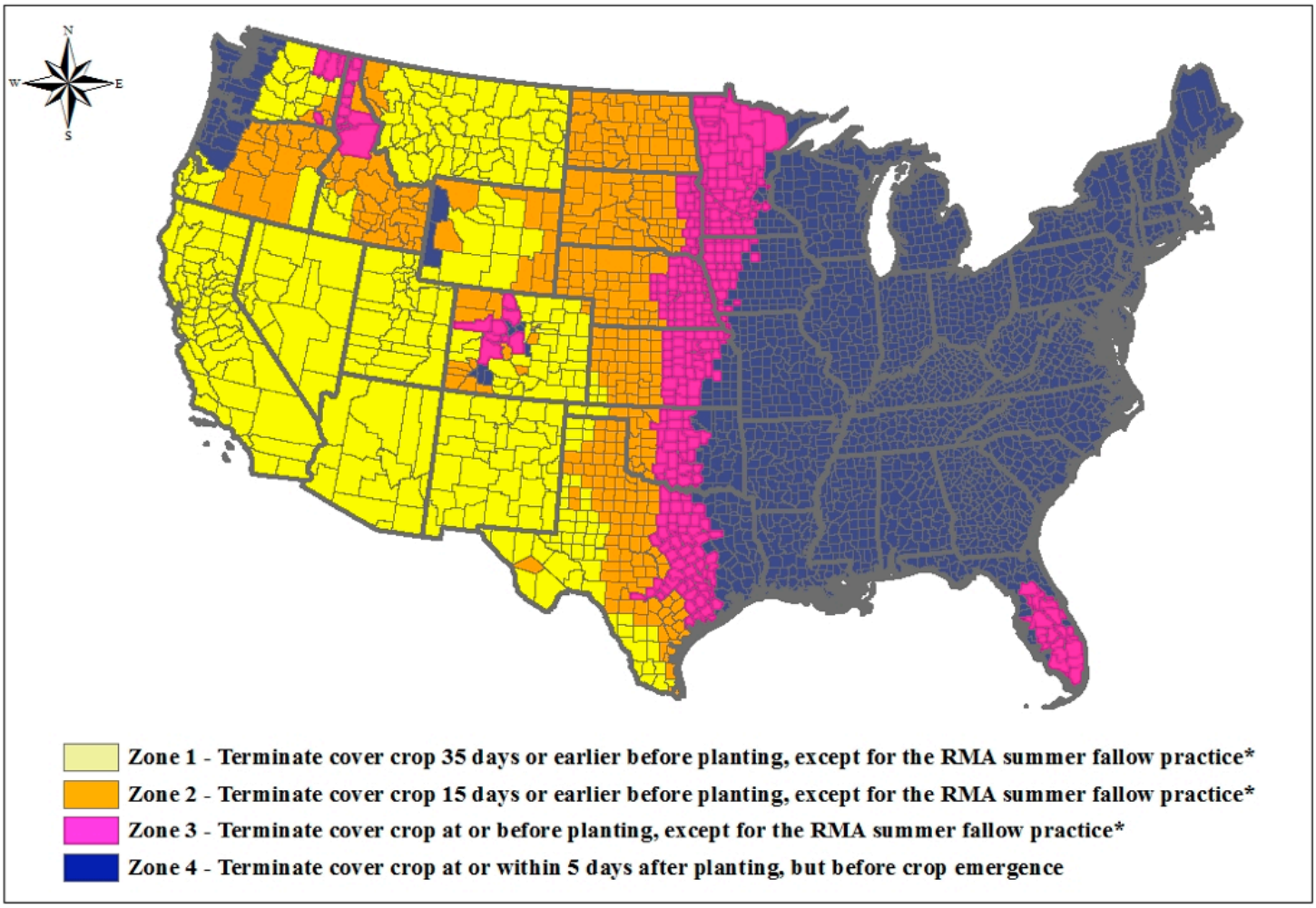

*See guidelines for details on the RMA summer fallow practice.

Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations:

1. If the season is drier than normal nearing cover crop termination time, consider an earlier termination to conserve soil moisture.

2. If the spring season is wetter than normal at cover crop termination time, consider a later termination to use excess soil moisture and improve seedbed condition.

3. If the cover crop is part of a no-till system, termination can be delayed up to 7 days from the above termination period guideline, but terminated prior to crop emergence for all zones and systems.

4. In zones 1 and 2, fall seeded cover crops will have limited growth in the spring prior to “early” spring seeded crops (e.g., spring wheat, sugar beets, corn), and therefore the cover crop may be terminated at or just prior to planting.

Photo: Justin Fritsher, NRCS

Cover crops in an orchard reduce soil erosion.

Photo: Gary Kramer

Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations (Continued):

5. Cover crop termination zones 1 and 2, in the largely mountainous regions in the Western U.S. (from Montana south to New Mexico and west to California), were refined by NRCS and other local university experts to identify proper cover crop management due to wide variability in climate and cropping systems in those areas.

6. Early vs. Later Spring Seeded Crops - Crops planted as early as possible after the spring thaw are considered early spring crops (e.g., spring wheat, spring barley, sugar beets, corn). Later spring crops include such crops as dry beans and soybeans.

7. New Technology - Where new technology has at least three years of satisfactory performance (achieves historical yield) based on farm records and the written approval of two "agricultural experts" as defined by RMA, the cover crop may be terminated closer to planting, if recommended by the experts.

8. Cover Crop Grazing or Forage Harvest – In all areas, except for the RMA summer fallow practice in Zones 1, 2 and 3, cover crops may be grazed or harvested as hay or silage as long as the planned amount of biomass is available at the time of termination to meet the conservation purpose. For the RMA designated summer fallow practice, cover crops should not be hayed or grazed. A cover crop harvested for grain or seed will not be considered to have been planted for conservation purposes, and will be considered a "crop".

9. Herbaceous Wind Barriers - There are specific cropping situations when seasonal cover is needed to protect young seedlings from wind erosion abrasion. The typical seasonal covers may include such crops as wheat, rye, or oats that are planted in rows, e.g., 20 feet apart (single or double row of small grain). These seasonal covers fall under the NRCS Conservation Practice Code 603 – Herbaceous Wind Barriers. These barriers are not considered cover crops.

10. Short Season Cover Crops – There are specific cropping situations where the producer will plant the intended crop, plus a short term seasonal cover crop (NRCS Conservation Practice Code 340 – Cover Crop) prior to or at the same time as planting the main or insured crop. In this case the seasonal cover emerges first and provides short term wind erosion protection until the main crop becomes established and provides its own protection from wind erosion. These seasonal cover crops are terminated by cultivation, frost /winterkill, or herbicides once the main crop is established. The seasonal covers used for the purpose of early crop establishment must be appropriate species for the area and the planned purpose.

11. Early Crop Planting – When earlier than normal planting occurs due to favorable weather or soil conditions, cover crop termination will naturally occur closer to planting. For example, in zone 2, if planting occurs 2 weeks earlier than normal, the cover crop termination period may be 2 weeks closer to planting.

Stripcropping with Cover Crops, Lancaster County, PA.

Photo: Bob Nichols

Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations (Continued):

12. Multiple Climates Within a County – Some counties may have multiple climate areas. In these situations, producers may request a different cover crop termination zone management or timeframe due to unique geographical and topographical features that reflect a different climate. Producers should contact either Extension or the local NRCS for management guidance. If the guidance includes practices other than indicated by the zones in this document, the producer must inform FSA and their crop insurance agent, as appropriate, and provide copies of the recommended management practice(s).

Definitions:

1. Over-Seeding/Interseeding – Both terms can be defined as planting one or more cover crop species into an existing or established crop. Common uses that involve over-seeding or interseeding include: (1) over-seeding a grass and/or legume cover crop into an existing stand of small grain at an appropriate time for the cover and germination, or (2) seeding a cover crop into an existing crop of corn or soybeans about the time of physiological maturity (leaves beginning to yellow) to get the cover crop started a few weeks earlier. Neither of these examples of over- seeding/interseeding would interfere with harvest of the main crop.
2. Interplanted – This involves multiple crop species grown together, with no distinct row pattern and does not permit separate agronomic maintenance or management. For RMA purposes, this means if a cover crop and cash crop are planted in a way that does not permit separate agronomic maintenance or management, then RMA will not insure the cash crop. This would also apply to cover crops if interplanted into the main crop and the cover crop interfered with the agronomic management and harvest of the main crop.
3. Relay Cropping – The practice of interseeding a second crop into the first crop well before it is harvested. The relay cropping strategy is used to enable production of a second crop in areas where time seeding the second crop following harvest of the first is considered inadequate for double cropping. This is not considered a cover cropping practice, but a method of double cropping and may fall under the RMA 1st / 2nd crop rules.
4. Double-Cropping – RMA and NRCS term: Harvesting at least 2 crops from the same land in the same year. This does not include cover crops.
5. Cover Crop - Crops including grasses, legumes and forbs for seasonal cover and other conservation purposes. A cover crop managed and terminated according to these guidelines is not considered a “crop”.
6. Good Farming Practice – RMA term - The production methods utilized to produce the insured crop and allow it to make normal progress toward maturity and produce at least the yield used to determine the for late planted acreage, which are: (1) for conventional or sustainable farming practices, those generally recognized by agricultural experts for the area; or (2) for organic farming practices, those generally recognized by organic agricultural experts for the area or contained in the organic plan.
7. Late Planting Period – RMA term - The period of time following the date considered as the final planting date for an insured crop. The late planting period may vary from a week up to a few weeks.
8. Prevented Planting – RMA term - Failure to plant the insured crop by the final planting date designated in the Special Provisions for the insured crop in the county, or within any applicable late planting period, due to an insured cause of loss that is general to the surrounding area and that prevents other producers from planting acreage with similar characteristics.
9. Continuous Cropping – RMA Term – A practice of growing crops annually in a rainfall limited area (where summer fallow is also a practice).