

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**COVER CROP**

(acre)

**CODE 340**

**DEFINITION**

Grasses, legumes, forbs, or other herbaceous plants established for seasonal cover and conservation purposes.

**PURPOSES**

- ◆ Reduce erosion from wind and water
- ◆ Increase soil organic matter
- ◆ Manage excess nutrients in the soil profile
- ◆ Promote biological nitrogen fixation
- ◆ Increase biodiversity
- ◆ Weed suppression
- ◆ Provide supplemental forage
- ◆ Soil moisture management

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

On all lands requiring vegetative cover for natural resource protection.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable To All Purposes**

Plant species, seedbed preparation, seeding rates, seeding dates, seeding depths, and planting methods will be consistent with approved local criteria (including all

federal, state and local laws) and site conditions.

The species selected will be compatible with the nutrient management and pest management provisions of the plan. See Table 1 for selection of Cover Crops.

Cover Crops will be terminated by harvest, frost, mowing, tillage, and/or herbicides in preparation for the following crop.

Herbicides used with Cover Crops will be compatible with the following crop.

Cover Crop residue will not be burned.

Application of this practice for all purposes requires seeding rates resulting in adequate, uniform vegetative cover shall be applied to properly prepared seedbeds. Proper seedbed preparation should result in a firm, weed-free seedbed, where an adult's heel-print leaves no greater than a one-half inch impression. When seeded into the residue of a harvested crop, seedbed preparation may not be necessary.

**Additional Criteria to Reduce Erosion From Wind and Water**

Cover Crop establishment, in conjunction with other practices, will be timed so that the soil will be adequately protected to control erosion to within the soil loss tolerance (T) or other planned soil loss objectives.

Plants selected for Cover Crops will have

the physical characteristics necessary to provide adequate protection.

The amount of surface and/or canopy cover needed from the Cover Crop shall be determined using currently approved erosion prediction technology.

#### **Additional Criteria to Promote Biological Nitrogen Fixation**

The specific Rhizobia bacteria will either be present in the soil or the seed will be inoculated at the time of planting legumes. See Agronomy Technical Note #3 for information on the use of inoculants.

Nitrogen credits from legume Cover Crops will be accounted for in the nutrient management plan. See Agronomy Technical Notes #10 – 15 for information on the preparation of a Nutrient Management Plan.

#### **Additional Criteria to Manage Excess Nutrients in the Soil Profile**

Cover Crops will be established and actively growing before expected periods of high precipitation that can cause leaching.

Cover Crop species will be selected for their ability to absorb large amounts of nutrients from the rooting profile of the soil.

The aboveground biomass will be removed from the field for maximum nutrient removal efficiency.

#### **Additional Criteria to Increase Soil Organic Matter**

Cover Crop species will be selected on the basis of producing high volumes of organic material to maintain or improve soil organic matter.

The NRCS Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) procedure will be used to determine the amount of biomass required.

The Cover Crop will be terminated as late as feasible to maximize plant biomass and still prepare the seedbed for the subsequent crop.

#### **Additional Criteria to Increase Biodiversity**

Cover Crop species shall be selected that, have different maturity dates, attract beneficial insects, serve as a trap crop for damaging insects, and/or provide food and cover for wildlife habitat management.

#### **Additional Criteria for Weed Suppression**

Species for the Cover Crop will be selected for their chemical or physical competition with weeds.

Cover Crop residues will be left on the soil surface to maximize allelopathic (chemical) and mulching (physical) effects.

For long-term weed suppression, perennials and/or biennial species can be used.

#### **Additional Criteria to Provide Supplemental Forage**

Species selected will have desired forage traits, be palatable to livestock, and not interfere with the production of the subsequent crop.

Forage provided by the Cover Crop may be hayed or grazed as long as sufficient biomass is left for resource protection.

### **Additional Criteria for Soil Moisture Management**

Terminate growth of the Cover Crop sufficiently early to conserve soil moisture for the subsequent crop.

Cover Crops established for moisture conservation shall be left on the soil surface until the subsequent crop is planted.

In areas of potential excess soil moisture, allow the Cover Crop to grow as long as possible to optimize soil moisture removal.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The Cover Crop should be terminated as late as feasible to maximize plant growth and still prepare the seedbed for the subsequent crop.

Deep-rooted species provide maximum nutrient recovery.

Consider that grasses utilize more soil nitrogen, and legumes utilize both nitrogen and phosphorus.

Avoid Cover Crop species that attract potentially damaging insects.

Acceptable benefits, for most purposes, are usually accomplished when the plant density is at least 25 stems per foot, the combined canopy and surface cover is at least 60 percent, and the above ground (dry weight) biomass production is at least 2700 lb/acre.

Cover Crops may be used to improve site conditions for establishment of perennial species.

Small grains are limited on dryland areas to those that normally receive at least 10 inches of precipitation.

Dryland seedings of sorghum and Sudangrass are limited to areas that average at least 12 inches of precipitation,

more than 1 inch of average precipitation in July, and an average July temperature above 65 degrees F.

Cover Crops should be seeded as soon as possible after harvest or broadcast prior to harvest. When broadcast, the seeding rate will be double the specified drilled rate shown in Table 1.

Sudangrass and foxtail millet are good summer Cover Crops. They should be planted in spring or early summer after the soil temperature is above 70 degrees F and the danger of frost is past. Sudangrass should be grazed with caution because it may develop prussic acid. Defer grazing until the plants are 20 to 25 inches high. Prussic acid poisoning will remain a threat to livestock after frost until the Sudangrass is completely dry, which takes from 1 to 6 days.

### **Irrigated Green Manure Cover Crops**

Alfalfa – plow down the last cutting in late summer.

Yellow Sweet Clover – seed with a small grain crop in the spring. Plow down in late summer or early spring of the following year.

Hairy Vetch – plant with small grain in the spring. Plow down in late summer.

### **Dryland Green Manure COVER CROPS**

Due to the potential for soil moisture depletion, green manure crops are not recommended in dryland cropping systems.

In general, Cover Crops are those rapidly growing plants, usually small grains or annual grasses that provide temporary soil protection.

Green manure crops are those leguminous crops that have a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria (Rhizobium

spp.) that will produce nitrogen for this and succeeding crops.

If needed, fertilizer should be applied to increase the effectiveness of cover plants. Application rates should be based on soil tests and be consistent with University of Wyoming recommendations.

Water budgets will be affected by this practice. The volume and rate of runoff water may be less, and infiltration will normally increase, although the growing crop will deplete soil moisture. Soil moisture depletion may be offset by enhanced snow storage.

The Cover Crop vegetation will reduce the movement of wind and water borne sediment, pathogens, and sediment-attached substances.

Growing vegetation will utilize available nutrients in the root zone. Decaying vegetation may tie up, then release nutrients into the root zone. Fertilizer application may be needed to offset this temporary immobilization of nutrients.

## **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and specifications will be prepared for the practice site. The State standard will specify practice requirements for site specifications. Specifications will include, but are not limited to, recommended species, seeding rates and dates, establishment methods, nutrients needed, and other establishment information. Specifications can be recorded in narrative format, on job sheets, or forms designed to provide specific requirements for the practice.

See the Specification Guide for this practice for requirements.

## **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

Control growth of the Cover Crop to reduce competition from volunteer plants and shading.

Control weeds in the Cover Crop by mowing or herbicide application.

**TABLE 1**  
**340 – COVER CROP SEEDING RATES AND DATES**

<b>Winter Cover Crop</b>	<b>Seeding Rate</b>	<b>Seeding Date<sup>1</sup></b>
Winter Rye	$\frac{3}{4}$ bushel <sup>2</sup>	8/15 to 9/15
Winter Wheat	$\frac{3}{4}$ bushel <sup>3</sup>	8/15 to 9/15
Winter Triticale	$\frac{3}{4}$ bushel	8/15 to 9/15
<b>Summer Cover Crop</b>		
Spring Small Grain	$\frac{3}{4}$ bushel <sup>4</sup>	4/1 to 7/1
Millet	10 lbs/acre	5/15 to 7/15
Sudangrass	8 lbs/acre	5/15 to 7/15
Sorghum	8 lbs/acre <sup>5</sup>	5/15 to 7/15
Sweet Clover <sup>6</sup>	4 lbs/acre	5/15 to 7/15
Alfalfa	5 lbs/acre	5/15 to 7/15

<sup>1</sup> These dates are general guidelines. Use knowledge of local conditions for seeding date recommendations.

<sup>2</sup> 1 bushel rye = 56 lbs

<sup>3</sup> 1 bushel winter wheat or triticale = 60 lbs

<sup>4</sup> 1 bushel barley = 48 lbs and 1 bushel oats = 32 lbs

<sup>5</sup> 1 bushel corn or sorghum = 56 lbs

<sup>6</sup> May be added to spring planted crops, but should not be planted alone.