

## Cover Crop (Ac.) 340

Bulletin E-2646, Michigan Field Crop Ecology and other recently published MSUE Bulletins, etc.

Also sowing cover crops in marginal areas could have many benefits see NRCS Michigan Agronomy Tech Note 49 Cover Crops on the Edge and NRCS MI Agronomy Tech Note 54 Michigan Cover Crop Management.

### DEFINITION

Cover crops include grasses, legumes, and forbs, established for seasonal cover and other conservation purposes.

### PURPOSES

- 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 structure
- Minimize and reduce soil compaction
- Reduce pest pressure
- Encourage Pollination

### CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

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

This standard provides guidelines for the selection of cover crops to address single or multiple resource concerns. It supports the principals and recommendations found in Michigan State University (MSU)-Extension

### 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 and site conditions (see Table 1 and 2) following row crops, vegetables, small grains, summer cover, and conservation use land.

Use weed-free and disease-free seed and establish cover crops by one of the following methods: over-seeding, frost seeding, aerial seeding, broadcast seeding, air-flow broadcasting, drilling or manure slurry seeding following MSUE recommendations. Aerial seeding of cover crops shall follow the requirements of the NRCS Michigan Agronomy Technical Note 52, Aerial Seeding of Cover Crops.

The species selected will be compatible with other components of the cropping system.

Cover crops will be terminated by harvest, frost, mowing, tillage, crimping, and/or herbicide depending on the resource concern used to justify the cover crop.

Ensure herbicides used with cover crops are compatible with the following crop.

Ensure that plants are not listed as noxious weeds or invasive species on the Michigan noxious weed or invasive species list.

Cover crop residue will 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 the attached: NRCS Cover Crop termination Guidelines-Non-Irrigated Cropland).*

#### **Additional Criteria to Reduce Erosion from Wind and Water**

Time cover crop establishment, in conjunction with other practices, so that the soil will be adequately protected during the critical erosion period(s).

Plants selected for cover crops will have the physical characteristics necessary to provide adequate protection (see Table 1).

Determine the amount of surface and/or canopy cover needed from the cover crop needed using the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE 2) or Wind Erosion Prediction System (WEPS) models. See Section I of the local NRCS Michigan eFOTG for instructions on using these models

Inter seed small grain cover crops in rows with row or vegetable crops to reduce wind erosion losses to the atmosphere and protect young seedlings from wind erosion saltation (abrasion) damage.

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

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

The NRCS Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) procedure found in RUSLE2 or WEPS model shall be used to determine the amount of biomass to have a positive trend in the soil organic matter sub factor.

The cover crop shall be planted as early as possible and be terminated as late as feasible to maximize plant biomass production, considering crop insurance criteria the time needed to prepare the field for planting the next crop, and soil moisture depletion.

#### **Additional Criteria to Capture and Recycle or Redistribute Excess Nutrients in the Soil Profile**

Cover crops will be established and actively growing before expected period(s) of nutrient leaching.

Select cover crop species for their ability to take up large amounts of nutrients from the rooting profile of the soil.

Terminate the cover crop as late as feasible to maximize plant biomass production. Consider the time needed to prepare the seedbed for planting the next crop and soil moisture depletion.

Cover crops to capture nutrients have many benefits. See the NRCS MI Agronomy Technical Note 46, ` Buckwheat a Phosphorus Pump; Agronomy Tech Note 47, Squeezing More Value from Manure with Cover Crops and Agronomy Tech Note 50 Oilseed Radish Cover Crop.

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

Use legumes or legume-grass mixtures to establish cover crops.

The specific Rhizobia bacteria will either be present in the soil or the seed will be inoculated at the time of planting legumes.

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

Select cover crop species to achieve one or more of the following: species mix with different maturity dates, attract beneficial insects, serve as a trap crop from damaging insects, and/or provide food and cover for wildlife habitat management. See NRCS Michigan, eFOTG, Section IV, Conservation Buffers and Beneficial Insects, Mites, and Spiders.

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

Species for cover crops will be selected for their chemical or physical characteristics to suppress or compete with weeds.

Higher seeding rates to provide additional cover will help control weeds to eliminate or reduce herbicide use.

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

If the objective is to use a cover crop as a bio-control a late kill may be used.

For long-term weed suppression, including on sites to be planted to trees and /or shrubs, perennials and/or biennial species can be used.

Cover crops for forest tree/tree shrub establishment sites shall be one of the following: white clover, redtop, Virginia Wildrye, Canada Wildrye (on upland landscapes), or Riverbank Wildrye (on floodplain or other lowland sites). The three Wildrye species are native to Michigan and are preferred for forest restoration plantings.

Cover crops for tree/shrub establishment shall control weeds in the areas between trees; however, cover crops are not a substitute for proper weed control in the areas adjacent to the trees and shrubs. Maintain at least an 18” radius zone around each seedling that is vegetation free. See the NRCS MI Tree/Shrub Establishment (612) and Tree/Shrub Site Preparation practice (490) standards for more information.

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

Terminate growth of 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.

In areas of potential excess soil moisture, allow the cover crop to grow as long as possible to maximize soil moisture removal.

#### **Additional Criteria to Minimize and Reduce Soil Compaction**

Select and manage cover crop species that will produce deep roots and large amounts of surface or root biomass to increase soil organic matter, improve soil structure and increase soil moisture through better infiltration.

There are many benefits to using cover crops as bio-till crops to reduce soil compaction before adopting a no till farming system. See the NRCS MI Agronomy Tech Note 48 Using Cover Crops to Convert to No Till, Agronomy Tech Note 50 Oilseed Radish Cover Crop, and Agronomy Tech Note 51 Radishes: A New Cover Crop Option.

#### **Additional Criteria to Reduce Pest Pressure**

To reduce sugar beet cyst nematode pressure, seed a fall seeding of oil seed radish after small grain. Use only Adagio or Colonel Oilseed radish varieties for this purpose.

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.

Pacific Gold Oriental Mustard cover crop can reduce damage of herbivore nematodes in orchards and potatoes. See the NRCS MI Agronomy Technical Note 45 Cover Crops for Orchards and NRCS MI Agronomy Technical Note 53, Soil Quality Enhancement for Tree Fruit and Potato Production Using Compost and Pacific Gold Oriental Mustard Cover Crop.

### **Additional Criteria to Encourage Pollination**

Use a mixture or strip planting of different clover species next to field edges and meadows where pollinators are foraging. All of the flowering clovers and alfalfa are good for pollinators. Buckwheat is a good choice for mid to late summer pollen source.

Annually sow Crimson Clover in blueberry alleys to attract bees and provide an additional pollen source. (Mutch, D. 2008. MSUE research trials unpublished data)

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

To establish a good stand, plant cover crops in a timely manner.

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 kill early and have a faster mineralization of nutrients to match release of nutrient with uptake by following cash crop.

The right moment to kill the 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 utilize both nitrogen and phosphorus.

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

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

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

Use plant species that enhance bio-fuels opportunities.

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

Use a diverse mixture of 2 or more species to address multiple purposes.

## **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and Specifications will be prepared for the practice site. Plans for the establishment of cover crops shall include:

- Field number and acres
- Species or species of plants to be established
- Seeding rates
- Recommended seeding date
- Establishment procedure
- Planned rate and timing of nutrient application
- Planned dates and method to terminate the cover crop.
- Other information pertinent to establishing and managing the cover crop.

Plans and specifications for the establishment and management of cover crops may be recorded in narrative form, on job sheets or on other forms.

## **OPERATION, MANAGEMENT, AND MAINTAINENCE**

Control growth of the cover crops to reduce competition from volunteer plants and shading.

Control weeds in cover crops by mowing or by using other pest management techniques.

Control soil moisture depletion by selecting water efficient plant species and terminating the cover crop before excessive transpiration.

Evaluate the cover crop to determine if the cover crop is meeting the planned purpose(s). If the cover crop is not meeting the purpose(s)

adjust the management, change the species of cover crop, or choose a different technology

For legume cover mixtures; use the appropriate inoculants or pre-inoculated seed if that particular legume has not been grown on the site within the last 5 years.

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

Do not recommend brassicas on the same field for more than two years in a row. Oil seed radish may be susceptible to club root disease or cabbage root maggot and shall not be used in a rotation with vegetable crops susceptible to these pests.

Rye, oats, or barley cover crops are recommended for organic soils.

Oats are recommended where the field will not be tilled in the spring and direct seeding is planned.

## REFERENCES

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45- Cover Crops for Orchards  
46- Buckwheat a Phosphorus Pump  
47- Squeezing More Value from Manure with Cover Crops  
48- Using Cover Crops to Convert to No-till  
49- Cover Crops on the Edge  
50- Oil Seed Radish Cover Crop  
51- Radishes- A New Cover Option  
52- Aerial Seeding of Cover Crops  
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- Warncke, D.D., J. Dahl, L. Jacobs, and C. Laboski, 2004. Nutrient Recommendations for Field Crops in Michigan. Michigan State University-Extension Bulletin E-2904, 30 pp.
- For free copies of MSU bulletins and other references see the pdf files at the following Web sites:

Web2.msue.msu.edu/bulletins/Bulletin/PDF/E-2897.pdf

Web2.msue.msu.edu/bulletins/Bulletin/PDF/E-2896.pdf

[http://www.covercrops.msu.edu/pdffiles/extension\\_bulletin\\_E-2907.pdf](http://www.covercrops.msu.edu/pdffiles/extension_bulletin_E-2907.pdf). (Verified March 31, 2010)

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<http://web2.msue.msu.edu/bulletins/Bulletin/pdf/E-2956.pdf>. (Verified March 31, 2010)

See the following Web site for a list of Aerial Applicators or National Agricultural Aviation Association (NAAA) to aerial seed cover crops:

<http://agaviation.org/>

*Attachment: NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines - Non-Irrigated Cropland*



Table 2 Cover Crop Seeding Rates Alone and in Seed Mixtures

Crop	Life Cycle	Seeds Per Pound (in thousands)	Seeding Rate Pounds per Acre	Seeding Rate Pounds per Acre	Approximate Days for normal Germination
			Alone	Mixtures	
<b>LEGUMES</b>					
Alfalfa	p	220	12-20	6-10	7
Alsike Clover	b/p	680	6-8	2-4	7
Annual Medic	a	300	10-15		
Berseem Clover	sa	200	9-20	6-10	
Birdsfoot Trefoil	p	375	4-8	3-5	12
Crimson Clover	sa	140	12	6-10	7
Field Peas	a	3	70-150	20-30	
Hairy Vetch	p	20	30-40		10-14
Ladino Clover	p	800	2-6	½-2	7
Red Clover	p	280	10-12	3-8	7
Soybeans	a	5	45-60		
Sweet Clover	b	260	12-15	5-10	7
White Clover	p	800	2-6	1-3	7
60/40 or 80/20 mix	ab	270	10-15	5-10	7
<b>NON-LEGUMES</b>					
Annual Ryegrass	a	227	15-25	4-10	10
Barley	a	14	48-96	36-72	
Buckwheat	a	20	36-60	-	
Cereal Rye	a	18	28-112	44-84	
Field Brome	a	280	15-30	10	
Forage Turnips/Rape	a	157	3-5	1-2	
Oats	a	13	34-68	32-48	
Oilseed Radish	a		15-25	2-5	
Pacific Gold Mustard	a	157	3-5	-	
Sudan Grass	a	55	20-25	-	
Triticale	a	13	60-120	44-84	
Wheat	a	12	60-120	44-84	

Source: Modern Fruit Science Table 1, Pg. 109, MUSE Bulletin 2107 and Northrup King FS 828-1

Note: The purpose of this table is to accommodate custom cover crop seed mixtures and provide guidance of published Seeding rates recommended for seed mixtures. It is suggested to keep an individual seed within the recommended range.

Table 3 Recommended Seed Mixtures (Seed Cocktails)

Seed Mixture	Species	Seeding Rate (lbs/ac)
<b>SM 1</b>	Austrian Winter Pea	20-30
	Oilseed Radish	2-5
<b>SM 2</b>	Hairy Vetch	25-30
	Cereal Rye	56-75
<b>SM 3</b>	Triticale	44-84
	Austrian Winter Peas	40-60



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 NRCS, Risk Management Agency and Farm Service Agency 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 termination cover crops guidelines to achieve their conservation benefit 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, and to cover crops actively growing at the time of termination.

Zone	Cover Crop Termination Period Guidance	
<b>Zone 1</b>	<b>For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops</b> Terminate cover crops 35 days or earlier prior to planting the crop.	<b>For Early Spring Seeded Crops</b> Terminate cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. [Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8.]
<b>Zone 2</b>	<b>For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops</b> Terminate cover crops 15 days or earlier prior to planting the crop.	<b>For Early Spring Seeded Crops</b> Terminate cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. [Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8.]
<b>Zone 3</b>	Terminate cover crop at or before the planting of the crop.	
<b>Zone 4</b>	Terminate cover crop at or within 5 days after planting, but before crop emergence.	

### 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.

## Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations (Continued):

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.
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 3 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 - Cover crops may be grazed as long as the planned amount of biomass is available at the time of termination. Cover crops that winterkill may be grazed to a level that meets their conservation purpose.
9. Irrigated Crops – Termination of cover crops utilized in an irrigated cropping system are not restricted to a given cover crop termination zone. The cover crop should be terminated based on the crop system and conservation purpose, but before the planted crop emerges.
10. 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](#).
11. 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.



*Tillage turnips used as a cover crop.*

*Photo: Justin Fritsher, NRCS*



*Cover crops in an orchard reduce soil erosion.*

*Photo: Gary Kramer*

## Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations (Continued):

12. 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.
13. Multiple Climates Within a County – Some counties may have multiple climate areas. In these situations, producers may request a different cover crop termination zone 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.

## 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 for 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. Harvested Cover – If an annual “cover” crop is harvested (e.g., as hay or silage) then that annual “cover” crop is 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 production guarantee or amount of insurance, including any adjustments 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 latest 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.

Zone 1 - See Map	Zone 2 - See Map	Zone 3 - See Map	Zone 4 - See Map
<b>Cover Crop Termination Period Guidance:</b>			
<p><b>For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops -</b> Terminate cover crops 35 days or earlier prior to planting the crop.</p> <p><b>Early Spring Seeded Crops -</b> Terminate cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. (Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8)</p>	<p><b>For Late Spring to Fall Seeded Crops -</b> Terminate cover crops 15 days or earlier prior to planting the crop.</p> <p><b>Early Spring Seeded Crops -</b> Terminate cover crops as soon as practical prior to planting the crop. (Additional Cover Crop Termination Considerations 4 and 8)</p>	<p>Terminate cover crop at or before planting the crop.</p>	<p>Terminate cover crop at planting or within 5 days after planting, but before crop emergence.</p>

Produced by: NRCS | ESD  
May 2013

## Cover Crop Termination Zones

