

**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.
- Increase biodiversity.
- Weed suppression.
- Provide supplemental forage.
- Soil moisture management.
- Reduce particulate emissions into the atmosphere.
- Minimize and reduce soil compaction.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

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

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Plant species, seedbed preparation, seeding rates, seeding dates, seeding depths, fertility requirements, and planting methods will be consistent with the "Establishing Vegetative Practices in Kentucky" document located in Section IV of the eFOTG.

The species selected will be compatible with other components (e.g. nutrient and pest management) of the cropping system.

Annual cover crops will be terminated by harvest, frost, mowing, tillage, crimping, and/or herbicides in preparation for the following crop.

Perennial cover crops (i.e. those used in orchards, vineyards and similar systems) will be maintained by mowing, soil fertility management, reseeding or other acceptable management activities that produce a uniform, healthy stand of vegetation.

Herbicides used with cover crops will be compatible with the current crop (in the case of perennial crops/vegetation) or following crop (in the case of annual crops/vegetation).

Avoid using plants that are on the NRCS's state noxious weed or invasive species lists.

Cover crop residue will not be burned.

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 during the critical erosion period(s).

Use seeding methods that have minimal soil disturbance (i.e. low STIR values) whenever possible.

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 current erosion prediction technology.

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 will be used to determine the amount of biomass required to have a positive trend in the soil organic matter subfactor.

Annual cover crops will be terminated as late as feasible to maximize plant biomass production, considering the time needed to prepare the field for planting the next crop and soil moisture depletion.

Perennial cover crops will be managed to maintain healthy and productive stands that promote soil organic matter enrichment and microbial activity.

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

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

Cover crop species will be selected for their ability to take up large amounts of nutrients from the rooting profile of the soil.

When used to redistribute nutrients from deeper in the profile up to the surface layer, the cover crop will be killed 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. A late kill may be used if the objectives are to use as a biocontrol and maximize the addition of organic matter. The right moment to kill the cover crop will depend on the specific rotation, weather and objectives.

Additional Criteria to Promote Biological Nitrogen Fixation

Only legumes or legume-grass mixtures will be established as cover crops.

The specific Rhizobium bacteria for the selected legume will either be present in the soil or the seed will be inoculated at the time of planting.

Additional Criteria to Increase Biodiversity

Cover crop species shall be selected that have different maturity dates, attract beneficial insects, increase soil biological diversity, 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 characteristics to suppress or compete with weeds.

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

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

Perennial cover crops will be managed to maintain healthy and productive stands that out-compete weeds for nutrients, light and moisture without competing with the crop (i.e. vines or trees).

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.

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 Reduce Particulate Emissions into the Atmosphere

Manage annual cover crops and their residues so that at least 80% ground cover is maintained during planting operations for the following crop.

Perennial cover crops will be maintained so that at least 80% ground cover is maintained during the driest period of the year and/or when the most traffic will be experienced.

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.

CONSIDERATIONS

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

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.

Use deep-rooted species to maximize nutrient recovery.

Use grasses to utilize more residual soil nitrogen.

Avoid cover crop species that allow potentially damaging diseases or insects to carryover to the next cropping year.

For most purposes for which cover crops are established, the combined canopy and surface cover is at nearly 60 percent or greater, and the above ground (dry weight) biomass production is at least 2,700 lbs/acre.

Cover crops may be used to improve site conditions for establishment of other perennial vegetative practices.

Use plant species that enhance bio-fuels opportunities.

Use plant species that enhance forage opportunities for pollinators.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

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

- Species or species of plants to be established.
- Seeding rates.
- Recommended seeding dates.
- Establishment procedure.
- Planned rates and timing of nutrient application.
- Planned dates for destroying cover crop (if applicable).
- 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 AND MAINTENANCE

Control growth of the cover crop 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.

REFERENCES

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