

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**  
**CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**  
**VARIANCE**

**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.
- Pest suppression.
- 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 approved local criteria and site conditions.

Refer to the Washington and Oregon Guide for Conservation Seedings and Plantings, USDA-

NRCS, September 1999 or other approved Extension guides to select plant species and seeding rates.

The species selected will be compatible with other components of the cropping system including Nutrient Management and Pest Management practices.

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

Herbicides used with cover crops will be compatible with the following crop.

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

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. (See Attached).

**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).

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 will 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.

The cover crop 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.

### **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 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 ratio may be considered to kill early and have a faster mineralization of nutrients to match release of nutrients with uptake by the 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 and Reduce Energy Use**

Use legumes or legume-grass mixtures to establish 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 will 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 Pest Suppression**

**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 annuals and/or biennial species can be used.

**Nematode Suppression.** Use species that suppress nematode populations, or that are non-hosts or poor hosts for nematodes.

### **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.

Where crop insurance is a consideration, please see the attached guidelines relative to haying and grazing (***NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines***, December 2013).

### **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 will 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 maximize soil moisture removal.

### **Additional Criteria to Reduce Particulate Emissions into the Atmosphere**

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

### **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 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 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.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

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

- Purpose
- Species of plants to be established
- Seeding rates and seeding method
- Recommended seeding dates
- Establishment procedure
- Planned rates and timing of nutrient application
- Planned dates and method for destroying 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 on OR-CONS-15, Seeding Specification Worksheet, 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.

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.

### **REFERENCES**

Bowman, G., C. Cramer, and C. Shirley, A. Clark (eds.). 1998. *Managing Cover Crops Profitably*. 2nd ed. Sustainable Agriculture Network Handbook Series, Book 3. National Agriculture Library. Beltsville, MD.

Hargrove, W.L., ed., *Cover Crops for Clean Water*. SWCS, 1991.

Magdoff, F. and H. van Es. *Cover Crops*. 2000. p. 87-96. *In Building Soils for Better Crops*. 2nd ed. Sustainable Agriculture Network Handbook Series; Book 4. National Agriculture Library. Beltsville, MD.

Reeves, D.W. 1994. *Cover crops and erosion*. p. 125-172 *In* J.L. Hatfield and B.A. Stewart

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Using Cover Crops in Oregon, Oregon State University Extension Publication, EM8704, October 1998.

Cover Crops Oregon Orchards and Vineyards, Oregon-NRCS, JS-OR-190-11-12, February 1991.

Nitrogen Scavenging: Using Cover Crops to Reduce Nitrate Leaching in Western Oregon, Oregon State University Extension Publication EM8728, October 1999.

Management of Residual Nitrogen with Cover Crops, Oregon-NRCS, Agronomy Technical Note No. 38, November 1999.

Cover Crop Dry Matter and Nitrogen Accumulation in Western Oregon, Oregon State University Extension Publication EM8739, October 1999.

Columbia Root-Knot Nematode Control in Potato, Using Crop Rotations and Cover Crops, Oregon State University Extension Publication, EM8740, November 1999.

Planting Dates for Fall Cover Crops in Irrigated Regions of Eastern Oregon, Oregon-NRCS, Agronomy Technical Note No. 9, October 2000.

Vineyard Cover Crops, Oregon NRCS, Agronomy Technical Note No. 55, October 1986.

Cover Crops as a Floor Management Strategy for Pacific Northwest Vineyards, Washington State University Extension Publication, EB2010, August 2006.

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



Cover crops on a field in Black Hawk County, Iowa.

Photo: Lynn Betts, NRCS

# NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines

December 2013

## 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.*

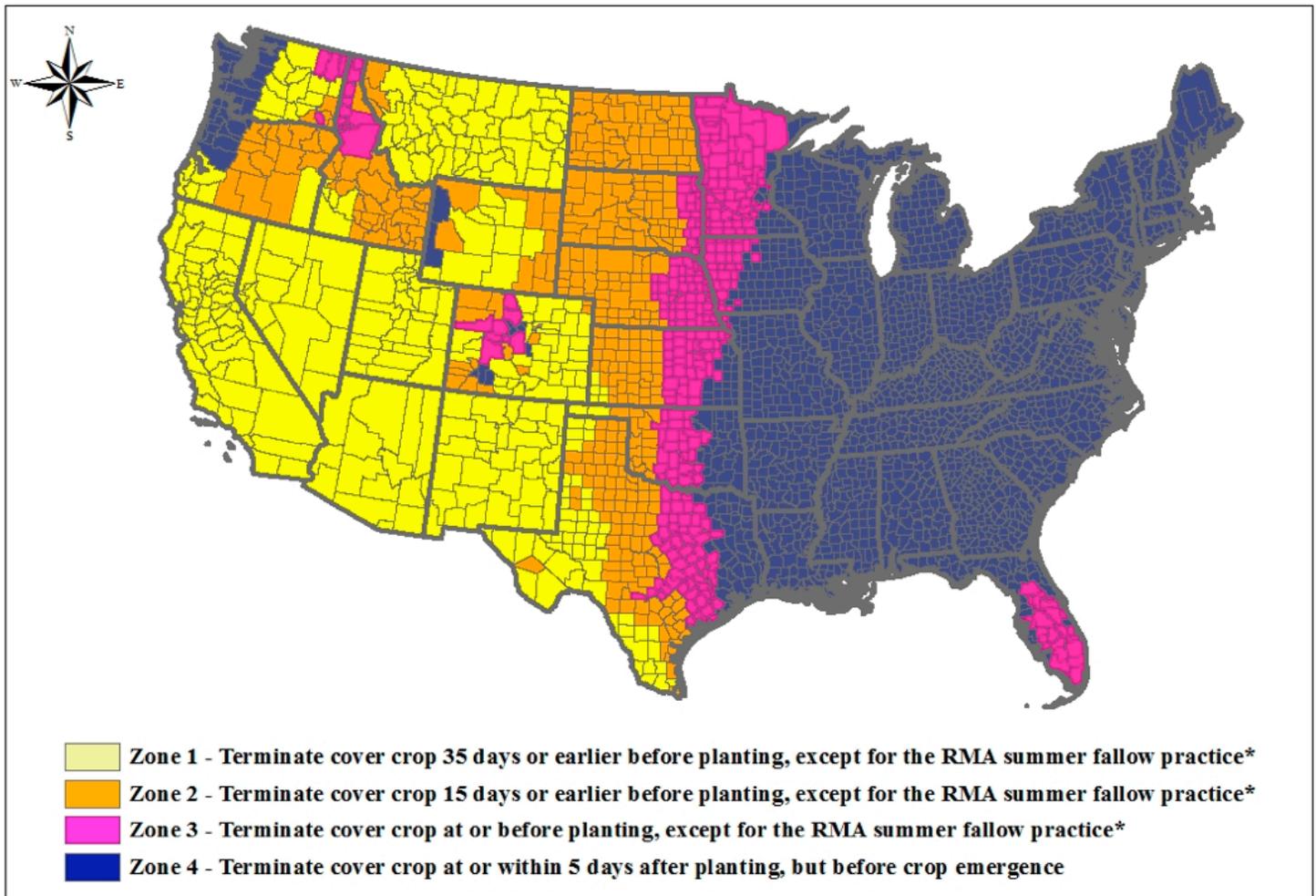
## NRCS Cover Crop Termination Guidelines for Management Zones

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:			
<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>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)</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>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)</p>	<p>Terminate cover crop at or before planting the crop.</p>	<p>Terminate cover crop at or within 5 days after planting, but before crop emergence.</p>
<p><b>RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting.</li> <li>* For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.</li> </ul>	<p><b>RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting.</li> <li>* For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.</li> </ul>	<p><b>RMA Designated Summer Fallow Practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* For summer seeded or fall seeded crops terminate the cover crop at least 90 days prior to planting.</li> <li>* For early spring seeded crops terminate the cover crop either in late fall or as early as possible in the spring prior to planting.</li> </ul>	

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

# \* Cover Crop Termination Zones

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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. 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).