

Findings from the Minnesota Cover Crop Guide stakeholder engagement activities

Prepared by Freshwater for the Minnesota Office for Soil Health

July 2019

DRAFT summary recommendations

During the month of June, 2019, 127 individuals from across the state participated in a survey, sharing about their roles in the agricultural sector and opinions about cover crops. Of those participants, four were interviewed for deeper insights into their responses and to further identify what is needed to support the advancement of cover crop adoption. The four, selected from a pool of respondents who consented to an interview, were carefully chosen to ensure a variety of perspectives and based on their stated likelihood of using the tool once developed.

This memo includes the recommendations for the development of the Minnesota Cover Crop Guide. Since the survey and interview responses contain implications for more than just this guide, the complete results from the analysis will be made available in a separate report.

There are two primary takeaways from the engagement activities that should serve as overarching recommendations:

- 1) Producers have largely already bought into the theoretical value of cover crops; it's just a question of whether cover crops will work for them.
- 2) Producers are looking for specific, actionable information that can help them understand how cover crops could work on their fields and how they can manage risk during implementation.

Both takeaways contain a lot of information, and detailing the individual points will provide important guidance in developing the Minnesota Cover Crop Guide. It is discussion of these overarching recommendations which plays out in this brief findings summary.

1. Point producers in the right direction.

There is a lot of great research out there, and even with Minnesota-specific information about species and planting timelines, there is an earlier step that is needed before selecting crops: understanding what kinds of cover crops are appropriate for the operation. Determining the goals for the operation and resource concerns for a specific field are essential first steps, and cover crops should be considered a means to an end more than an end in and of itself.

Each producer's field is going to have a different context—soil type, topography, climate, etc.—and a blanket statement of “plant cover crops—they're good” can send the wrong message and not engage producers in working through this step. A series of questions that should be considered to uncover operation goals and resource concerns before engaging with the Minnesota Cover Crop Guide would be a useful addition to help producers more clearly know where to start. Something that can be filled out using a mobile device or printed off for carrying out to the field or carrying into an SWCD office would be appropriate.

2. Help producers see themselves as being able to work through the transition.

Producers indicated over and over again that interacting with and learning from peers is a critical part of their decision-making process. They strongly value practical experience. Site visits, chances to see what others are doing, and the opportunity to learn from others' mistakes and successes are all valuable ways to do this. While in-person opportunities to do this don't fit within an online guide, case studies that capture some of this information may be appropriate. This includes success stories, as well as stories about challenges and how producers worked to overcome them. There is a lot of risk in incorporating cover crops. Knowing how others have worked through this (and perhaps even giving them a call if case study farmers are willing to share their contact information) can help mitigate some of that risk.

3. Where possible, provide specific and actionable information. Where not, point to other places where that information exists.

There is a large amount of research out there about different kinds of crops, different rotation patterns, and other variables done in controlled settings or considered applicable to a broad cross section of situations. Many producers and staff in the agricultural sector are already familiar with a number of sources. However, producers are looking for information that is *specific to Minnesota*, as well as to *specific regions within Minnesota*. They want to know what will work for their soil type, their freeze dates, their precipitation patterns, and their temperatures. That information will help them make specific choices about their operations. Additionally, they want to know how different options interact with different herbicides, and how to make an appropriate transition. Getting down to that level of customization is important for producers, but may be beyond the scope of this guide. Identifying trusted “plug and play” type calculators could help producers interact with information at that level. Pointing them to those tools could be a very valuable addition to this guide.

4. Include links to financial and administrative support.

Similarly, recreating or repackaging information that is largely available elsewhere was discouraged by producers and staff. Instead, in addition to the new information it will be providing, this guide should serve as a clearing house for links to useful resources. Participants stressed that what is included in the clearing house extend beyond just University and academic research. Including a rolling “events” page for distributing information about field tours, peer-to-peer networking events, and opportunities that support other recommendations in this memo was also suggested.

5. Plan for a robust rollout.

In addition to peer learning, producers noted that they get most of their support and information from their local SWCD staff, who build relationships with producers and pass on useful information that can help producers. Overwhelmingly, staff respondents reported that they primarily provide technical and financial support to producers, and note that these roles are often applied to conservation and farm management planning efforts (as well as some administrative support for grant applications and reporting).

Staff from SWCDs and elsewhere would be interested in the Minnesota Cover Crop Guide, but in order to have them refer it to producers, it will be important that the rollout of the guide connects with appropriate audiences and sets up the possibility of a rippling distribution.

- a. Trusted peers.** Peers were one of the top two most sought out advisors for producers. Build relationships with producers over the course of developing this guide and refine it during field testing so that, when it is time for distribution, the guide has buy-in from local producers around the state and they’re excited about it, too. If they know this is a useful new tool, they’ll pass it on to their neighbors, folks at the coop, and others. Additionally, consider hosting a field day to introduce people looking for answers to a peer who can help them.
- b. Trusted local staff.** SWCD staff were identified as the other top advisor. Make sure that staff understand how this guide will help them work with producers in their areas so that they can incorporate it into the suite of tools they use and recommend.
- c. State agencies:** Responses from agency staff placed a higher emphasis on connecting with UMN Extension than producers did, and while they identified culture and peer pressure as a challenge producers face, they placed less value on the role of peer-to-peer learning opportunities than other respondents. Despite these differences, agency staff were clearly still focused on the need to have this guide provide practical information for producers that fit their current growing and management practices, as well as risk tolerance of adopting cover crops (impact to current revenue streams, opportunities to mitigate startup costs, etc.).
- d. UMN Extension:** Given Extension’s role as an advisor for local and agency staff, it will be important that rollout also include a training and overview of what is in the guide and how it can be used.