

# Local farmers reap benefits of cover crops

Improved water infiltration cited as a primary one

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In a nutshell, that's the greatest benefit Jerry and Nancy Ackermann of rural Lakefield and Dave Christoffer of rural Okabena have seen since they began using cover crops.

"The wet spots in the

field disappeared," Jerry Ackermann said, "and it helps compaction on the end rows."

Christoffer agreed.

"The greatest benefit I see from the use of cover crops is that the porosity of the soil increases," he said. "Better water infiltration benefits are faster return to soil conditions that are favorable to the crops being grown and moisture is stored

See **COVER CROPS** on **C4**

## COVER CROPS: Reaping benefits

*Continued from C1*

in the soil for use later by the crops rather than running off the land or evaporating."

The Ackermanns have farmed for more than 38 years and today maintain a crop rotation of corn, soybeans and alfalfa. They are also distributors for LaCrosse Seeds, and, in recent years, have been active with on-farm research and test plots.

Christoffer is also a resident of Jackson County, and has farmed for more than 43 years. He now uses strip-till and cover crops on his corn and bean acres.

"A more oxygenated soil allows for the microbial population in the soil to multiply and increase its activity, which mineralizes nutrients that are tied up and not shown by a soil test," Christoffer said. "This can result in a lower requirement for

fertilizer. A better earthworm population also helps to mineralize the tied-up nutrients. Earthworms also improve water infiltration and create channels for roots to follow so that they can reach moisture during periods of low rainfall."

Both Christoffer and the Ackermanns have experimented with various mixes of cover crop seed over the years. These mixes include cereal rye, radishes, clover, purple top turnip, rape seed and oats.

After many years of experimenting, they decided to seed cover crops on all their fields. Farmers across the area are beginning to follow suit. This year alone, Jerry Ackermann sold seed for more than 5,800 acres of cover crops in Nobles and Jackson counties.

Just like any crop, Ackermann and Christoffer said, cover crops have

their challenges.

"My greatest challenge in using cover crops has been getting them established with a sufficient stand and early enough to get enough growth to increase the benefits of using cover crops," Christoffer said. "Interseeding the cover crop at about the V6 stage in corn, I think, will become the norm for our latitude. In soybeans, using more cover crops over winter may be something I will be looking for, especially when the bean crop is maturing later, thereby not allowing for a long growth period before a freeze terminates the cover crop."

Another challenge the Ackermanns have experienced is their herbicide selection. They believe working with an agronomist and researching residuals can be beneficial when selecting products.



FILE PHOTO

Dave Christoffer, who has farmed for more than 43 years near Okabena, now uses strip-till and cover crops on his corn and bean acres.