

Cover Crops...Are aerial applicator applicators missing an opportunity?

by David Eby

American farmers are the most environmentally responsible people on earth. Deriving their living from irreplaceable soil, these conscientious producers know the importance of maintaining the soil at maximum productivity. Due to rising production costs of agricultural inputs, growers are rediscovering and reevaluating cover crops as an integral part of their agricultural practices. They intuitively know that with the proper application of the correct mix of cover crop seeds they will have a future payback in productivity and a compensating financial return. Cover crops add humus, increase fertility, reduce fertilizer costs, loosen compacted soils, increase earthworm activity, improve drainage and prevent erosion.

Aerial applicators are a vital part of the process since an aerielly applied cover crop is the most practical way to apply the seeds. However, one can almost hear the collective sigh of despair coming from fellow applicators when "cover crops" are mentioned. Thoughts immediately focus on all the problems associated with the application of cover crops from a logistical perspective. Initial thoughts include long ferries with small and unusual shaped fields resulting in unprofitable operations. Following that are images of converting the aircraft to a spreader, estimated gate-box settings, best guess on swath width, volume and density considerations, consistent flow rates due to seed shape compounded with not enough acres at one time to make the job worthwhile. Finally, the potential reimbursement of expensive seed if one estimates incorrectly. Consequently, because of all the variables and uncertainties, cover crops have been at the bottom of aerial applicators' "fun" things to do list.

Aerial applicators need to be encouraged to take a second look at cover crops applications. If applied properly, this practice could bring increased revenue on a consistent basis at a time of year when many operations are winding down. However, there are two critical issues of concern for both aerial applicators and growers:

Seed Integrity--It is important to buy seed from a reputable company. This issue alone has caused some problems in the growth of cover crop usage because of inconsistent performance. It has been documented where some seed companies have mixed varieties when they are running short and the grower does not get what he ordered. Therefore, to keep the integrity of the cover crop market only buy from reputable and established seed dealers.

Oregon grows most of the grass seed sold for cover crop uses. State and federal laws protect the purity of seed products. Seed is inspected and tested for purity and performance. Be sure to check the analysis tag on any purchased seed to assure quality.

Aerial Integrity--There is an impression among cover crop enthusiasts that aerial applicators cannot be depended upon to make quality applications. This has been demonstrated by the indisputable evidence of improperly applied cover crops growing in fields for all to see. For aerial applicators to become an important part in the future of cover crops, ag pilots must demonstrate a proficiency in keeping with grower expectations. A quality application is imperative or aerial applicators will see their role in production agriculture marginalized.

Of recent, this writer has had conversations with key people in four mid-western states. All expressed the same complaint; hoping the aerial industry could develop a solution ensuring competent and consistent cover crop applications.

Evolving from meetings with cover crop specialists, a potential solution to reestablish aerial credibility is an Aerial Applicator Certification Program proposed and currently in the process of implementation. Plans are being formulated to conduct an Operation Safe Aerial Cover Crop Application Workshop in June of 2011, conducted by Dennis Gardisser of WRK, Inc. Locations will be announced depending on attendees. The goal is to "certify" aerial applicators by incorporating application techniques such as swath width, airspeed, gate box settings and various seed characteristics, along with actual aircraft calibrations so that growers can employ aerial applicators to apply cover crops with confidence. For more information contact David Eby at dave@agriflite.com.



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