

Middle Columbia Watershed of Oregon

FARM #29

Noah Williams farms about 2,400 acres of winter wheat, spring barley and sunflowers with his wife in Wasco, Oregon. He harvested his first crop in 1998 after he came back to the farm following his service with the Coast Guard. At that time, his practices were conventional; however, in 2005, he switched his operation to no-till.

For about five years now, Noah has been incorporating cover crops on all of his owned acres. "It's easier to do stuff on ground you own than it is on leased ground around here because most leases are percentages, not cash rents," he explained.

For his cover crops, he uses a mix of multiple species. His standard mixture contains triticale, oats, forage collards and phacelia. However, he's played around with a number of other species, including turnips, safflower and sorghum Sudan grass. "Really, the best mix I did was probably the second year I did cover crops, and it was triticale, oats, phacelia, forage collards, turnips, safflower, sunflower, common vetch and peas," Noah said. He always likes to include a species for pollinators, normally phacelia, in his mixture to provide a natural habitat for pollinators in his area. "I think it's healthier for my farm by having them in there," he said.

One of the biggest benefits he's seen from his soil health practices is weed suppression. Russian thistle is a common weed problem on his operation. "By growing the cover crop, it really seems to suppress the Russian thistles," he said. On his cover crop fields, he's able to use two spray jobs instead of the three or four he uses in his chem-fallowed ground. Another large benefit has been a reduction in compaction. Noah, with help from his local soil and water conservation district, has done compaction tests that have shown that he's taken about 200 pounds of compaction out of his soil with just one crop. He's also noticed that the cover crop helps lower his wheat stress following major weather events.

When possible, he likes to have cattle from neighboring operations graze his cover crops. "I mean, it's like the top feed you can buy, so why not be grazing it?" he said. "You're basically putting the money back into your own pocket."



"Every year, I try to do a little more or something a little different – you have to learn to adapt to the situation," he said. "In this area, we grow pretty much only winter wheat because it's easy, does well, and the market is in our backyard, making for cheap freight. The downfall to this mindset is that many believe it's all we can do, and I want to change that. I want to make the nay-sayers see that there are alternatives. It might not be as easy, but it will work and be better for our farms."

View Noah's interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WtaPaMcb3I>

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