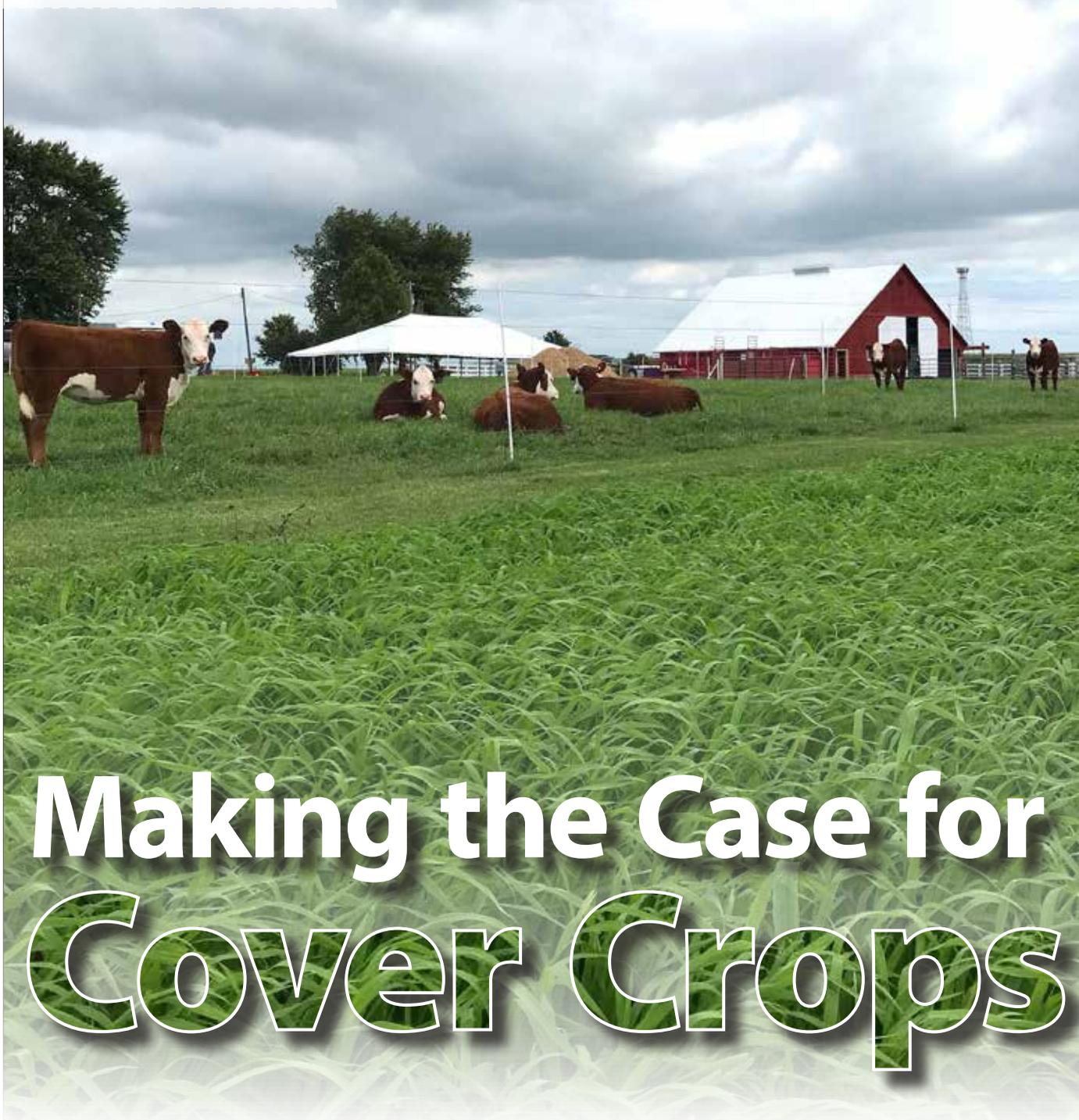


Happ Herefords held its first sale last September, and Japanese millet cover crop can be seen in the foreground.



# Making the Case for Cover Crops

Reduced erosion and extra forage are two benefits of using cover crops on farmland.

by *Kindra Gordon*

A decade ago near Mendota, Ill., Chris Happ sought supplemental late-season feed for the Hereford cow herd he raises with his family.

Working with his dad, Joe, Happ raises primarily corn and soybeans along with custom planting and harvesting grain crops for others. Chris, Janell, Henry, Morgan and William Happ own Happ Herefords, which includes about 100 Hereford and crossbred cows.

To get some extra mileage out of the farmland where their corn and soybeans had been harvested, Happ and his dad decided to plant a fall cover crop. The additional forage the cover crop provided worked so well the Happs have

stuck with cover crops and have found the benefits go beyond just “extra feed.”

“We’ll plant cereal rye, or oats and radishes combined, or turnips and radishes,” he explains of their cover crops that are now planted on one-fourth to one-half of their farmland at the end of each summer.

Of the benefits from cover crops, Happ says having the extra crop — and its growing roots — in the ground through the fall and winter months can help dry up the cropland quicker in the spring in order to get the cash crop planted. Happ says cover crops have reduced water runoff, erosion and weeds on cropland, and have broken up compacted soils under no-till management.

Similarly, just an hour south near Streator, Ill., where Jim Isermann raises corn, soybeans and beef cattle with his father David, the father-son duo have tapped cover crops to better integrate their cattle operation with their grain operation.

The Isermanns sought out cover crops with the goal of enhancing

soil health by increasing their crop diversity. The addition of alfalfa was a boost for cattle forage, followed by a boost to crop yields. They also like cereal rye for early spring or fall grazing. Isermann adds, “We’ve tried almost everything.”

He rattles off a list of cover crops including sorghum sudan, millet, oats, radishes, turnips, annual rye grass and even barley.

Isermann explains cover crops provide an extra living root in the soil during much of the year when the soil otherwise would not have had a crop there. The living root not only helps hold soil in place during rain and flood events but is also a food source below the ground to the millions of soil microbes at work in the soil. Meanwhile, the top of the plant can be a forage source to be baled or grazed and fed to livestock. Some producers feel soil health benefits underground are so valuable, along with the future boosts to crop yields, they do not need to graze or hay the above ground portion.

Isermann’s experiences with cover crops extend beyond his own operation. Since 2015 he has worked with the Soil Health Partnership (SHP) as a representative working with producers in Northern Illinois and Wisconsin. The SHP is a program of the National Corn Growers Association with a vision for developing a farmer-led research network measuring the impacts of implementing soil health practices such as cover crops. (Presently, SHP has nine field representatives across the Midwest. For more information, visit [SoilHealthPartnership.org](http://SoilHealthPartnership.org).)

## Try it yourself

For other producers who have not yet waded into the cover crop world, Happ encourages them to do some research and to visit with others in their area who are using cover crops. He credits a couple of neighbors, as well as a local ag retailer, for helping him learn more about cover crops.

Along with that, Happ suggests taking a baby step and trying one field planted to cover crops. “You’re not going to put cover

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— Jim Isermann



Illinois' Chris and Janell Happ and their three young children rely on cover crops for extra feed. Here they are pictured in a cover crop field planted to sudan grass.



Chris Happ plants soybeans into a stand of cereal rye in the spring. Over winter, the rye stand helped hold soil in place to minimize wind erosion and reserve moisture for the spring crop.



crops on your farm all at one time," he notes.

Isermann encourages producers to consider the types of crops they may plant and how those may fit into their current cash crop and livestock system and to learn about the timing and rotational sequence of cover crops to ensure there is no negative impact to the spring cash crop.

He also notes for grazing, the infrastructure of fencing and available watering sources for livestock can be two hurdles if those are not already in place on cropland.

As a final word of wisdom, Happ stresses that flexibility is key with cover crops. "Every year is different," he notes. Some years he is able to

plant seed shortly after harvest. In 2019, harvest did not finish until December, so he was not able to plant as many cover crops. Some years he will even plant cover crops into his corn using an airplane before the corn is harvested. Additionally,

in years when a rye cover crop has a good stand, he may chop and bag it. Other years, he may graze it. Some years, cover crops have carried his cow herd so he did not have to feed a bale of hay until March. **HW**

### Treat the soil like your child

A popular mantra among soil health enthusiasts is to "treat the soil like your child."

As an example, you would not leave a child in the hot sun without protection or stick a sharp tool (like a plow) into them. Likewise, the soil needs plants to help keep it covered and protected, and it should be minimally disturbed from tillage.

Similar to a child, soil does not rest – it needs food constantly. Living roots in the soil help provide that food. Cover crops help keep a living root in the soil for more months out of the year. **HW**

### Why invest in soil health through cover crops?

- Do you realize that soils are the basis of life and produce 95% of our food supply?
- Are you aware we are losing 30 soccer fields of soil around the world every minute due to urban growth and poor land management methods?
- Did you know, that according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, scientists predict our planet will run out of topsoil in just 60 years if the current rates of soil degradation continue? **HW**