Applying knowledge to improve water quality
Great Lakes
Regional Water Program
A Partnership of USDA CSREES
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Widening the Use of Cover Crops in the Midwest

GREAT LAKES REGION

National Themes:
Nutrient and Pesticide Management
Watershed Management

Project Description

Recent research has shown that improved management of row crops alone cannot achieve the needed nutrient reductions to achieve national hypoxia goals. In addition to improving drainage management, increasing acreage under perennial crops or cover crops is critical to reduce nutrient losses from fields. Making cover crops easier, more profitable, and better supported by Land Grant universities and other agencies will result in increased nutrient uptake during the winter and result in reduced nutrient loss to ditches and streams. To further these goals, a diverse group representing academia, production agriculture, non-governmental organizations, commodity interests, the private sector, and federal and state agencies met in 2007 and formed the Midwest Cover Crops Council (MCCC). The mission of MCCC is to improve the ecological and environmental functioning of the predominant annual cropping systems in the upper Mississippi and Great Lakes basins by growing cover crops on 30 percent of these acres within 15 years.

The third annual meeting of the Midwest Cover Crops Council, Indianapolis, March, 2008.

Project Goals

The overall goal is to achieve widespread adoption of cover crops throughout the Midwest.
Specific goals include:

- establish federal and state-based farmer incentive programs across the region to serve as models that include energy, carbon, and nutrient management credits;
- develop new environmental criteria for biomass crops, including an increase in cover crops as part of state energy policies;
- secure funding to support pilot studies in major ecozones that will help quantify the environmental and economic benefits of cover crops; and
- conduct germ plasm development research;

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- develop cover crop systems that fit a variety of niches within annual row crop systems;
- enhance public awareness and support for cover crops;
- develop policy incentives and programs to increase farmer adoption of cover crops in the region; and
- provide education and training to farmers and agencies at regional and local levels to help them understand and adopt cover crops management practices.

Outcomes

The Midwest Cover Crops Council website offers a wealth of information and resources about the use of cover crops. *http://www.mccc.msu.edu/*

The Council has identified five major priority areas under which a series of activities and initiatives over five years will be undertaken to fulfill the overall goal of increasing cover crops adoption in the Great Lakes/Upper Midwest region. These priorities include: policy, communications, research, education/outreach, and fund raising. Members of the Council's network have developed five-year action plans in each of these areas that will increase funding for research and development; enhance public awareness and support for cover crops; develop policy incentives and programs to increase farmer adoption of cover crops in the region; and provide education and training necessary to farmers and agencies to make the appropriate shifts to facilitate this adoption.

Several resources have been developed to help meet these goals, including: an MCCC website* (http://www.mccc.msu.edu/) and listserv, hosted by Michigan State University; and a web-based regional cover crop selection tool (to be launched in 2009) to assist farmers in making cover crop decisions and foster the adoption of cover crop systems.

**Website development was supported through the Green Lands Blue Water Initiative at the University of Minnesota*

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www.uwex.edu/ces/regionalwaterquality

http://www.mccc.msu.edu/

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