

NNY Farms Successfully Growing Cover Crops For Dairy Forage in On-Farm Trials

Farmers in northern New York and a Cornell University research team are evaluating the value of planting winter cereal crops, such as triticale, wheat and cereal rye, as cover crops for spring harvest as a forage for dairy cows.

The farmer-driven Northern New York Agricultural Development Program funded two years of cover crop trials on 11 North Country dairy farms in 2011-2012. Eight NNY farms are participating in 2013 trials to learn how much nitrogen is needed at crop greenup to grow the winter cereal crops as cover crops for harvest in May as forage for dairy cows.

When the grains are grown as cover crops that are also harvested for forage, they can increase annual per-acre crop yields. The cover crops also help protect water quality, reduce soil erosion, conserve plant nutrients, and improve soil quality.

The research focus has included the amount of nitrogen (N) taken up by the cover crop seeded after corn silage harvest, the amount of N that can be credited for use by the spring-planted crop after the cover crop is harvested or plowed into the soil, and the yield and forage quality that can be expected from harvesting the cover crop.

At McKnight's River Breeze Farm in Waddington, NY, Travis McKnight successfully harvested triticale planted as late as early October in the northern NY climate. He plants in well-drained or tiled fields that are in second-fourth year corn.

Yields at Mapleview Dairy in Madrid, NY, were excellent in 2011 and 2012, but the trial this past winter showed that without snow cover triticale can winterkill with prolonged periods of exposure to low temperatures.

Trials on these St. Lawrence County farms show the potential for cover crops to provide excellent yields of high quality forage. The trials also demonstrate that attention to recommended crop management practices, such as seed bed preparation, is critical to success.

More information on this cover crop research is on the Cornell Nutrient Management Spear website at <http://nmisp.cals.cornell.edu>. Detailed results for this Cover Crops in Corn Silage Systems in Northern New York: Can Farms Conserve Nitrogen Fertilizer and Safe Money by Using Cover Crops? project and other crop research are posted at www.nnyagdev.org.

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program provides practical, on-farm research, technical assistance, and outreach to farmers in Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties.