



Indiana State Department of Agriculture
One North Capitol Avenue, Suite 600
Indianapolis, IN 46204
www.isda.in.gov



Natural Resources Conservation Service
6013 Lakeside Boulevard
Indianapolis, IN 46278
www.in.nrcs.usda.gov

NEWS RELEASE

Fall Conservation Transect Results Released – Cover Crops Thrive in Tough Farm Economy *One Million Acres of Living Cover Crops Reported*

INDIANAPOLIS (May 22, 2017) – According to the 2016 Fall Conservation Transect Report, Hoosier farmers planted over a million acres of cover crops for the second year in a row.

Jane Hardisty, State Conservationist with USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) says having over a million acres of planted cover crops makes Indiana the leading state in the Midwest, if not the nation.

"I'm really excited about these numbers because we also have data to show that for each acre USDA pays a farmer to plant cover crops through a Farm Bill program, another four to five acres are being planted without our cost share," Hardisty said. "To me it's significant because it means farmers are realizing the financial benefits of investing in the health of their soil as a farm-business decision."

The transect is a collaborative effort between NRCS, the [Indiana State Department of Agriculture](#) (ISDA), Indiana's 92 Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Earth Team Volunteers and other members of the [Indiana Conservation Partnership](#) who team up to conduct a visual assessment of cropland county by county using a predetermined route.

They collect data on tillage methods, plant cover, residue, etc. to help document a more complete story of conservation efforts in Indiana. The survey uses GPS technology and provides a statistically reliable method, and then uses USDA [National Agricultural Statistics Service](#) (NASS) data on crops for estimating farm management and related annual trends.

"Conservation continues to be a priority for Hoosier farmers, and this report proves that," said Ted McKinney, ISDA Director. "By observing land use conditions and tracking these trends, we're able to focus our attention strategically and utilize our combined resources more effectively around the state."

This year's data may be surprising considering the tough farm economy, but not to Rodney Rulon who farms with his family near Arcadia, Indiana. Rulon and his family have been continuously no-tilling and using cover crops for a number of years.

"We have done the math and this year we calculate the total benefit of cover crops on our farm at around \$69 per acre," Rulon said. "That's a 266 percent return on our investment in seeding and planting."

Cover crops have many benefits like increasing organic matter for better soil biology and improving infiltration and water-holding capacity, according to NRCS. In a state that receives as much as 40 inches

of rain in a year, cover crops also prevent nutrient leaching by capturing excess nutrients and sediment - keeping them on the farm and out of nearby waterbodies and streams.

In fact, with just under ten percent of the state's row crop acres protected by cover and living roots in 2016, approximately 3.27 million pounds of nitrogen, 1.63 million pounds of phosphorus and 1.33 million tons of sediment were prevented from entering Indiana's waterways.

Cover crops can also build resiliency in the soil, according to Rulon. "Wet springs like the one we're experiencing and hot dry summers are great reasons to give cover crops a try," Rulon said. "Some of the biggest benefits I've seen in using cover crops with no-till have come in years of drought. The drought of 2012 was one of the worst I've seen in my lifetime, and our average yield was 130 percent of the county's average or almost twice the normal difference."

According to Hardisty, "Another interesting trend is Hoosier farmers have planted about four times more acres of cover crops than what NASS reports for wheat acres in Indiana. Since most farmers have had some experience with wheat, we see this as a tremendous opportunity to get even more farmers comfortable with trying cover crops, so we expect our numbers of acres to continue to grow."

In addition to cover crops, the transect also analyzes fall tillage and residue trends. Fields not tilled in the fall have crop residues to protect the soil from fall, winter and spring rains, which further limits sediment and nutrient losses. The 2016 report shows that Indiana farmers left their crop residues undisturbed this past fall as follows:

- 67 percent of soybean acres
- 58 percent of corn acres
- 50 percent of small grain acres
- 31 percent of specialty crop acres

The ICP believes the no-till and cover crop acres represented in the transect data are at a much higher and sustainable quality because many farmers are using multiple conservation practices as part of a total *soil health management system*. A systems approach means using practices like adaptive nutrient management, integrated weed and pest management, crop rotations, precision technology and prescriptive buffers that work together with cover crops and no-till to improve soil function.

"Indiana Soybean Alliance and Indiana Corn Marketing Council are proud of Indiana farmers for taking proactive steps to improve soil health and water quality," said Alyson Wells, Director of Production and Environment for the Indiana Soybean Alliance and Indiana Corn Marketing Council. "Reduced tillage and cover crops are two options farmers can take to help increase production and protect the environment, and the growing use of these practices shows that farmers are making changes that can have big impacts both on and off the farm."

ISDA maintains tillage transect reports dating back to 1990 on their website at <http://www.in.gov/isda/2383.htm> and includes the most recent transect results. To learn more about the transect data for your county, visit your local Soil and Water Conservation District office found here: <http://www.in.gov/isda/2370.htm#>.

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Note to the press: The photo below and attached can be attributed to the Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative and is a cover crop mix growing in moderate residue.



Contacts:

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Jane Hardisty, State Conservationist, 317-295-5801 (jane.hardisty@in.usda.gov)

Rebecca Fletcher, State Public Affairs Specialist, 317-295-5825 (rebecca.fletcher@in.usda.gov)

Indiana State Department of Agriculture

Ben Gavelek, Communications Director, 317-690-3303 (BGavelek@isda.IN.gov)