# **Cover Crop Resource Series**

# COVER CROP FACTS

# Cover Crops at Work: Covering the Soil to **Prevent Erosion**

An overview of cover crop impacts on soil losses from agricultural production systems<sup>1</sup>

# **ABOUT COVER CROPS**

Cover crops are tools to keep the soil in place, bolster soil health, improve water quality and reduce pollution from agricultural activities.

- They include cereals, brassicas, legumes and other broadleaf species, and can be annual or perennial plants. Cover crops can be adapted to fit almost any production system.
- Popular cover crops include cereal rye, crimson clover and oilseed radish. Familiar small grain crops, like winter wheat and barley, can also be adapted for use as cover crops.

#### Learn more at www.sare.org/cover-crops



Photo Credit: Edwin Remsberg

# **Cover Crops and Erosion**

Cover crops can successfully decrease, or almost completely eliminate, soil loss from various production systems. They do this by:

- Providing coverage of the soil surface and protecting it from rain and wind
- Rooting into the soil profile and improving soil structure
- Encouraging water infiltration to the soil profile

#### Studies have shown decreases in soil loss from fields planted into different types of cover crops.

- Non-legume cover crops, including rye, ryegrass, triticale, barley, and wheat, reduced soil loss by 31% to 100% as compared to fields in which no cover crops were grown.
- Legume cover crops, including red clover, crimson clover, lentil and pea, reduced soil loss by 38% to 69% as compared to no cover crops.
- Mustard, a brassica, reduced soil loss by up to 82% as compared to no cover crop.
- On average, cover crops reduced sediment losses from erosion by 20.8 tons per acre on conventional-till fields, 6.5 tons per acre on reduced-till fields and 1.2 tons per acre on no-till fields.

## **Management Decisions Matter**

- The best management practices for preventing soil loss are those that maximize ground coverage year-round, and these include no-till management in combination with cover crop growth.
- Conservation tillage practices were responsible for an 89% reduction in soil loss as compared to conventional tillage.

## **Cover Crops Can Steward Water Quality and Soil Health**

- Erosion is a costly depletion of resources, a displacement of soil from where it is needed to where it becomes a pollutant in waterways. Displaced soil can carry nutrients, like nitrogen and phosphorus, which further pollute waterways.
- We can invest in reduced rates of soil loss from agricultural fields, whether in vineyard rows or corn fields, by planting cover crops, maintaining constant ground cover and utilizing no-till management.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise cited, all data comes from a bibliography compiled by SARE and the University of Missouri.

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