## Preparing for Cover Crops (Singleton)

With harvest fast approaching, that means it's time to start thinking about plans for planting cover crops this fall. If you're an experienced cover crop user, you know that planting cover crops is more than just throwing some seed out – it requires a complete rethinking of how you approach your production system. Depending on your current practices, it may require a change in timing, logistics, and priorities surrounding fertilization, equipment, weed management, planting, and harvesting. If you're new to cover crops and interested in trying some out on your operation, it's best to ease in slowly on a small area until you are comfortable with the changes. Some things to keep in mind:

**1. Understand goals –** Clarify what you want to achieve through using cover crops, whether its mitigating erosion/runoff, suppressing weeds, boosting soil health, or just keeping the soil covered during the offseason.

**2. Start small –** Try it out on a small area to begin with and increase your acreage as you get more comfortable. If you have a small field that you see often or have an area that's prone to erosion/runoff/leaching this is a great place to start. To really get a good understanding of how to make these practices work, it's most helpful to be able to closely observe the site throughout the year.

**3. Easy entry points –** If you can, pick a field that will allow you to have "extra time" to plant and manage your cover crop. This might be a field that you harvest first or plant later…giving you some wiggle room in the "in-between crops" period that improves flexibility and helps you see what needs to be adjusted for next time.

**4. Select compatible species –** Considering what crop you are planning to plant next, keep species selection simple to begin with. Rye/oats/other small grains are a great place to start (cheaper $), before trying more complex species mixtures (more expensive $$$). Match the species to the goals you want to achieve (ex. weed control = high biomass cover crop, etc.).

**5. Understand agronomic practices –** Once you select your species, adjust your seeding rates based on your planting method (broadcast vs drilled). Keep an eye on the weather and hold off on planting until adequate soil moisture is present. Overseeding into standing cash crops (before harvest) is an option, however this will introduce another level of complexity that must be considered (cash crop maturity, potential for seed to reach the soil, etc.). Drilling the cover crop will provide the best seed to soil contact after the cash crop has been harvested.

**6. Understand termination –** In the spring, don't let termination slip up on you…. understand when the cover needs to be terminated based on the relationship between the cover crop species selected and the upcoming cash crop. When the cover is terminated will influence how much biomass/residue remains when it's time to plant the cash crop, so keep equipment considerations in mind and level of comfort when starting out.

Most folks in peanut/cotton rotations utilize cereal rye, oats, or wheat as their cover crop of choice. Each of these small grain species are relatively cost effective, produce sufficient biomass in our environment, and generally shape up into a nice conservation tillage production system in the spring.