COVER CROPS TO CONSIDER

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INTRODUCTION

A sustainable agricultural system is one that, over the long term: enhances environmental quality and the resource base on which agriculture depends; provides for basic human food and fiber needs; is economically viable; and enhances the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole (White et al., 1994). Increased diversity of crops grown in rotation and no-till farming practices are important components of sustainable agriculture systems. Improved yield under rotation is related to both soil and crop parameters. Crop rotations that included legumes increased soil nitrogen levels (Peterson and Varvel, 1989; Raimbault and Vyn, 1991). Crop rotation also improved soil structural stability (Raimbault and Vyn, 1991), increased crop water use efficiency (Varvel, 1994), improved crop mineral nutrient uptake (Riedell et al., 1998), and increased soil organic matter levels (Campbell and Zentner, 1993).

Many of the advantages of no-till crop production are derived from the residue mulch that remains on the soil surface after grain harvest. The residue mulch protects the soil from wind and water erosion but also delays soil warming in the spring (Swan et al., 1996). Cooler soil temperatures translate into slower seed germination, reduced uptake of non-mobile soil nutrients, and less vigorous early crop growth (Barber, 1984; Griffith and Wollenhaupt, 1994). Under no-till conditions, Drury et al. (1999) found that fall-seeded cover crops (red clover) planted after wheat harvest allowed the following corn crop to have emergence and yield equal to that of a corn crop following wheat under tilled conditions. Meisinger et al. (1991) outlined the importance of cover crops in improving environmental quality. Cover crops scavenge nitrogen from the soil profile and prevent it from moving below the root zone during periods of time when the soil water is being recharged. Under tilled conditions, cover crops also help protect the soil from water and wind erosion. Hatfield and Keeney (1994) outlined some of the knowledge gaps in cover crop use that need to be addressed through research including; cover crop systems for climates with short growing seasons and/or low water availability, and the benefits of fixed nitrogen from legume cover crops. As different cover crop species have differing characteristics, the hypothesis is that certain cover crop species will be more suited for inclusion in complex crop rotations under no-till soil management in the northern Great Plains than other species.

APPROACH

A field experiment was conducted in which different species of grasses and legumes (planted into spring wheat stubble) were evaluated as cover crops in crop rotational system (soybean/spring wheat-cover crop/corn) under no-tillage soil management. The experiment is located near Brookings, South Dakota on a silty clay loam at the USDA, ARS, Northern Grain Insects Research Laboratory on two separate experimental sites. Cover crop (including 14 different species), a fallow (no cover crop) and conventional tillage treatments were replicated four times within the experimental area. Cover crops evaluated include: Crimson clover, alsike clover, red cover, sweet clover, annual ryegrass, winter ryegrass, hairy vetch, Carneval field pea, Austrian winter pea, slender wheat grass, non-dormant alfalfa, sudangrass, buckwheat and barley. All cover crops were planted in early August (following spring wheat harvest) at recommended seeding rates. The following spring all plots were planted to corn. Corn phase of the rotation was planted on 29 May, 2001 and 6 June 2002.

Soil samples were collected prior to the first cover crop planting. The 0-60 cm samples will be separated into 0 – 15, 15 – 30 and 30 – 60 cm increments before initial soil physical and chemical conditions are measured. During the course of the experiment, data collection included growing environment (soil temperature, soil moisture, rainfall, and air temperature, soil physical properties (soil bearing strength, bulk density, water content at planting, and vane shear strength), total cover crop growth, soil nitrogen mineralization, cash corn emergence and growth (stand counts, phenological development staging, and leaf area index), and final corn grain yield and quality (protein and oil content).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are numerous species of grasses and legumes that can be utilized as cover crop. The species that best fit each individual situation is dependant on a number of factors. As stated previously this research project evaluated 14 different species, as well as a no cover crop (fallow), and conventional tillage treatments. For the purpose of this presentation and report only a few species will be discussed. These species were selected due to their significant effect on measured parameters.

One of the biggest concerns with no-till production practices is stand establishment due to unfavorable environmental conditions at the time of planting. Soil temperature measurements collected the day prior to planting (28, May, 2001 and 5, June, 2002) illustrated the dramatic difference in soil temperature for conventional tilled plots versus plot that did not receive tillage (Figure 1). The lowest soil temperature for the 2001 season was the no cover crop treatment and the red clover, while in contrast for 2002, the hairy vetch had the lowest soil temperature compared to the other cover crop treatments and no cover crop treatment. These differences were possibly due to the large differences in biomass production for the red clover and hairy vetch. The photos illustrate the large differences in growth the two years. Hairy vetch biomass production was quite low in 2001 compared to 2002, while red clover biomass production was quite high for 2001 compared to 2002 (Figure 1). This variation accounted for a significant difference in ground cover between the two species each year contributing to the differenced in soil temperature.

Stand counts were performed to evaluate the effect of soil temperature on stand establishment. Initial stand counts performed eight days after planting revealed that emergence for the hairy vetch and no cover crop was significantly lower compared to the other treatments, while the conventional tillage and slender wheatgrass had the highest initial emergence (Figure 2). Count performed on later dates (11 to 13 days after planting) found that stand establishment evened out for all treatments except for the hairy vetch which remained significantly lower (approximately 5,000 fewer plants per acre).

Another concern with no-till production in an area with limited growing degree days is the ability to plant crops in a timely manner to utilize as much of the growing season as possible. No-till production in this area can delay crop planting due to moist soil conditions in the spring. Cover crops that survive the winter have the ability to utilize this excess moisture and increase soil strength to ensure an earlier planting date. Soil strength is defined as a measure of the soils capacity to withstand stresses without giving way to those stresses by collapsing or becoming deformed. Soil bearing strength and the depth of soil failure was measured to evaluate the effect different species have influence soil trafficability. Measurements collected prior to corn planting found that plots with a hairy vetch cover had a significantly higher bearing stre ngth compared to all other treatments, with conventional tillage and no cover crop treatments having the lowest bearing strength (Figure 3). This can be attributed to the above ground biomass growth characteristics and the root system. While the hairy vetch did not have the highest spring or fall biomass production, the manner in which the hairy vetch grows should assist in increasing the soil strength. Winter rye had a significantly higher biomass production in the fall and spring compared to the hairy vetch, but the structure of the winter rye is dramatically different (Figure 4). The hairy vetch grows in a manner that it is inter-twined making a thick mat that covers the ground, while the winter rye exhibits a vertical growth. While the bearing strength was not significantly different for the conventional tillage compared the no cover crops and the other cover crop treatments the depth of soil failure was significantly deeper, indicating that once force is applied to the soil such as tractor wheels that exceed the bearing strength the soil will fail or sink to a depth of eight inches compared to the hairy vetch that would only sink to a depth of five inches after considerably more pressure is applied (Figure 3). In general terms this indicates that plots with a hairy vetch cover crop would be able to handle heavier wheel traffic without causing significant compaction.

Corn grain yield was significantly affected by cover crop treatment for the 2001 growing season the no cover crop, red clover and winter rye had the highest yield compared to the conventional tillage and slender wheatgrass, with hairy vetch resulting in the lowest yield. While for the 2002 growing season the no cover crop, hairy vetch, slender wheatgrass and red clover had the highest yield compared to the conventional tillage and winter rye. This experiment illustrated the ability of cover crops to utilize excess soil moisture and increase soil strength compared to conventional tillage or no cover crop, without adversely affecting yield.

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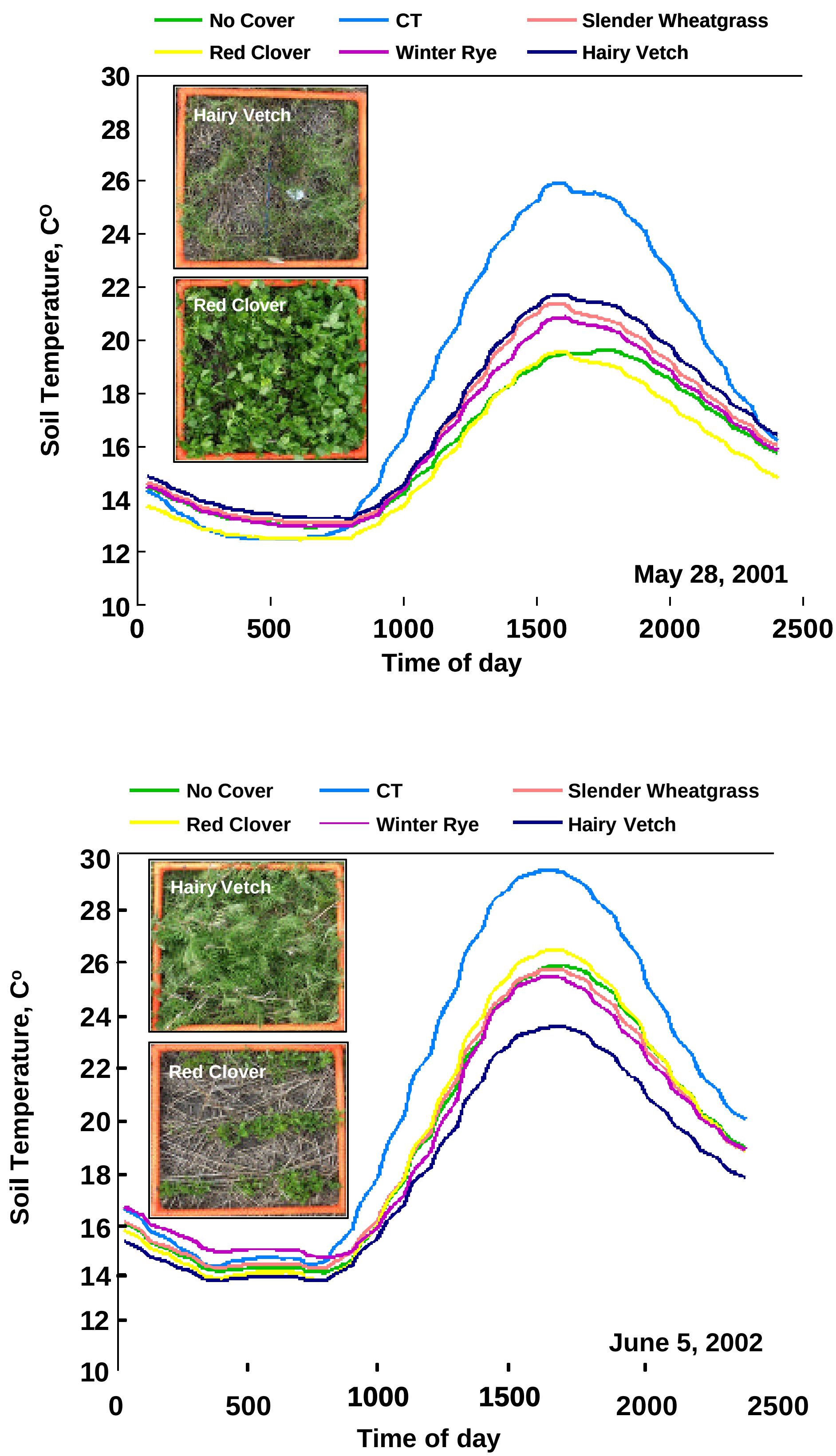

Figure 1. Soil temperature at 3 inches the day prior to corn planting, by treatment for the 2001 and 2002 experiment.

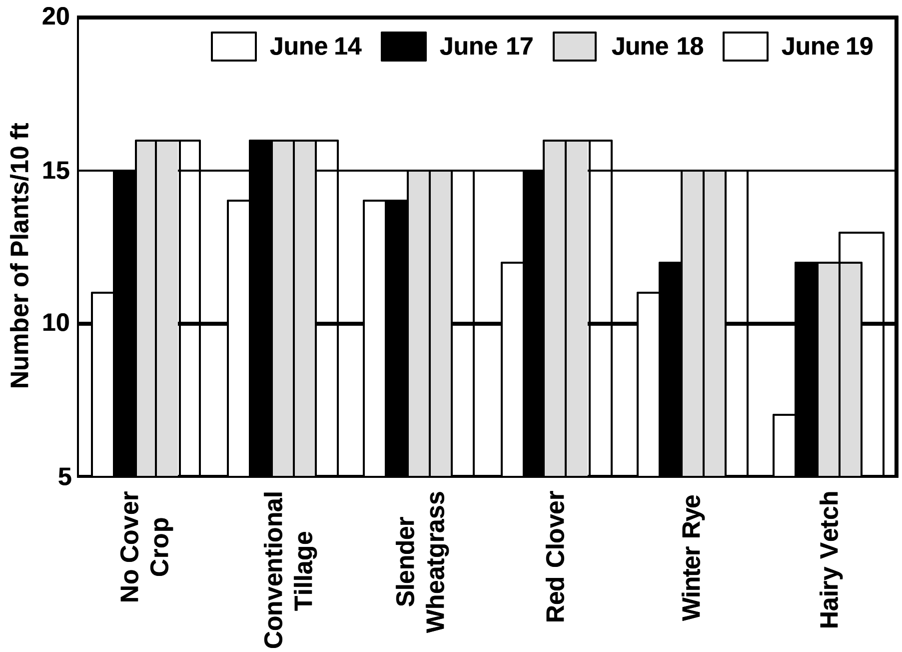

Figure 2. Stand establishment counts, number of plants emerged in to feet of row, by treatment for the 2002 experiment.

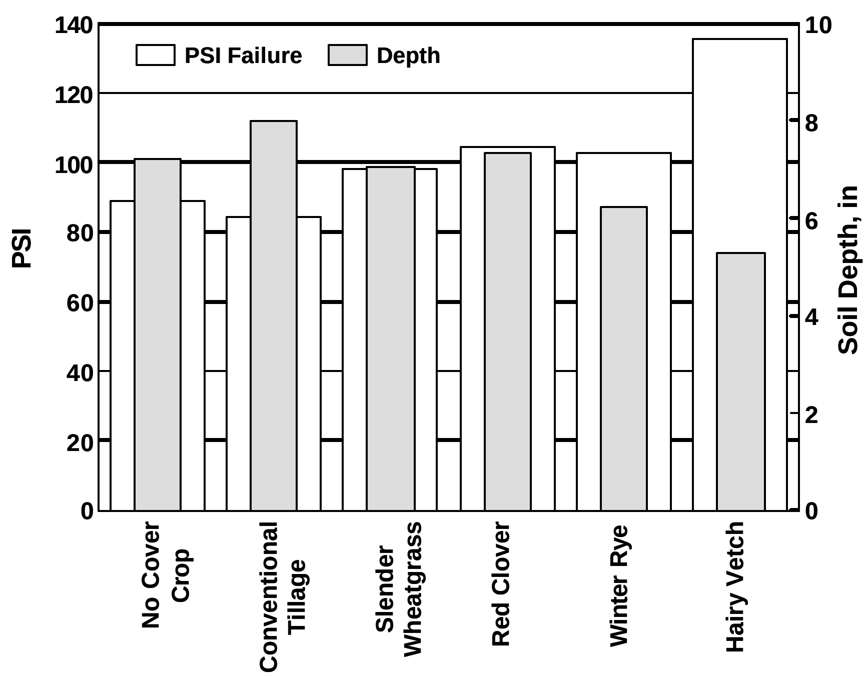

Figure 3. Soil bearing strength measured in pounds per square inch of pressure and the depth of soil failure, by treatment for the 2002 experiment.

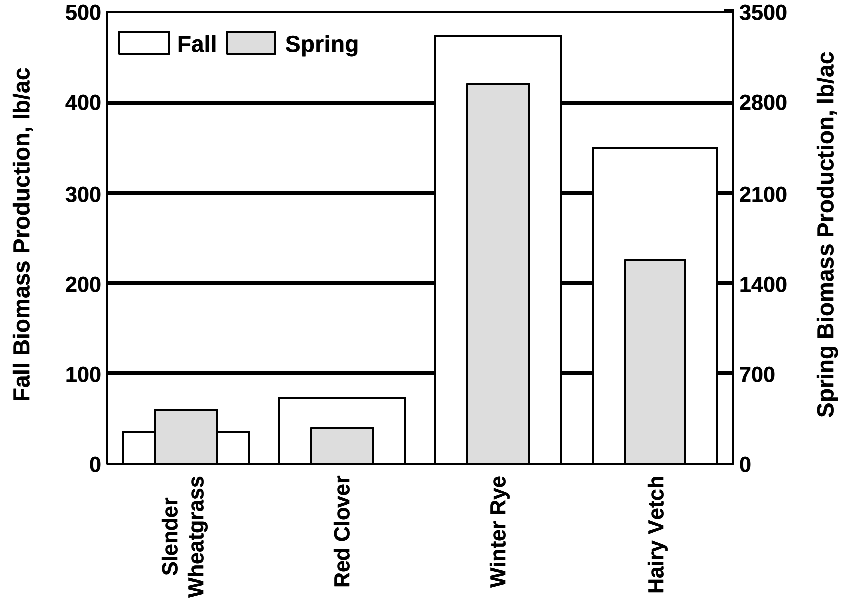

Figure 4. Individual cover crop biomass production; fall biomass growth from planting until killing frost; spring biomass growth from early spring until herbicide burndown approximately two weeks before planting for the 2002 experiment.

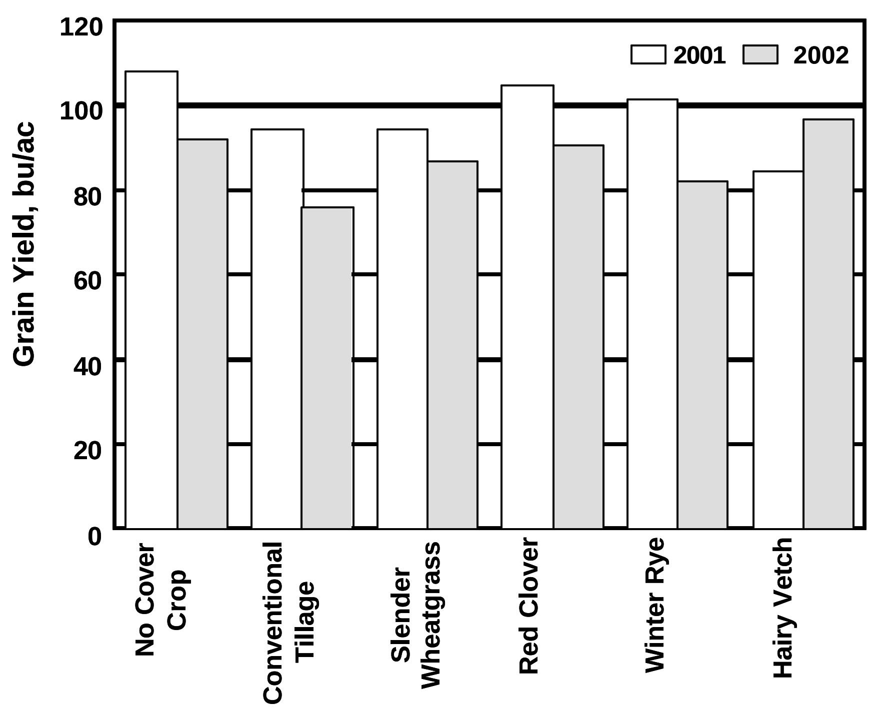

Figure 5. Corn yield following cover crop growth for each treatment for the 2001 and 2002 growing seasons.

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