

More states now see economic and environmental benefits of the Oregon produced crop

Oregon annual ryegrass continues to take root in the U.S.

January 23, 2008... With each passing year, annual ryegrass from Oregon planted as a winter cover crop is proving itself to be a valuable tool in providing economic and environmental benefits for farmers in the Midwest and beyond. It hasn't been a silver bullet and there is still much research to be done, but the ten year effort by Oregon grass seed growers to find a U.S. market among producers back east has been well worth it.

"Two and a half years ago, I was privileged to be part of a domestic trade mission to the Midwest extolling the virtues of Oregon annual ryegrass," says Katy Coba, Director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "Our 2005 trip succeeded in raising awareness and creating partnerships between our annual ryegrass growers and Midwest producers, along with extension agents, conservation officials, and other university educators who attended the presentations and field demonstrations that summer."

Initially touted for its environmental benefits as a cover crop, annual ryegrass has indeed shown to help reduce erosion and runoff from farmland in the Midwest. But evidence continues to mount as to its economic value to corn and soybean farmers. Crop yields, even in drought years, have been extremely impressive in areas where annual ryegrass has been used in a no-till field. Quite simply, the ryegrass promotes a deeper root system for corn and soybean plants. The story of its success is spreading.

"Ten years ago, there was no annual ryegrass being used in the Midwest, now you have no trouble finding farmers who have used it," says Don Wirth, a Willamette Valley grass seed grower who has put in a lot of work on behalf of the Oregon Ryegrass Commission in promoting annual ryegrass back east. "In drought areas that normally see about 53 bushels of corn per acre, growers using annual ryegrass are still getting 120 bushels. With just a little bit of rain, those growers are getting more than 200 bushels per acre. I can't imagine being a progressive farmer there and not using annual ryegrass."

The 2005 trade mission focused on a three-state market of Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. Interest in using annual ryegrass has expanded to at least a dozen states, many outside the Corn Belt. Dairies in Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland are looking at the cover crop to provide forage for cattle—yet another benefit of annual ryegrass to the large animal agriculture found in other parts of the U.S.

Last week, consultant Dan Towery of Ag Conservation Solutions based in Lafayette, Indiana, gave the Oregon Ryegrass Commission an update on what has been known up to now as the "Midwest Project". Towery still characterizes it as a niche market for Oregon growers, but the size of that niche is still unknown and continues to emerge. Without overselling the success, he told growers that the use of annual ryegrass continues to show positive results in conservation, higher yields, and forage.

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"There is no free lunch when it comes to farmers back east using annual ryegrass," says Towery. "It requires a high level of management— knowing when to plant the seed in the fall and knowing when to burn it down with herbicide in the spring. There is a narrow window to get the crop established in the fall so it can withstand the cold winters. We've also learned some varieties of annual ryegrass do much better than others."

Institutions like Purdue University, Ohio State University, and the University of Missouri are putting in their own dollars now to conduct additional research on annual ryegrass applications. Specifically, Ohio State is completing studies on how ryegrass helps fight soybean cyst nematode, resulting in better crop yields. The university is also continuing research on annual ryegrass as an effective scavenger of nitrogen in the soil profile. Studies show that the overwinter crop can absorb nitrogen from livestock manure, store it, and then release it when maximum nitrogen is needed by corn planted in a no-till field. With high costs for commercial fertilizer, a cover crop like annual ryegrass that enhances the value of manure can be another key benefit for farmers.

"Annual ryegrass is also doing a good job reducing nitrates that get into rivers and streams," says Towery. The promotion of Oregon annual ryegrass has targeted those who provide technical assistance to growers— soil and water conservation districts, extension agents, and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Improving water quality continues to be a key selling point.

It is estimated that nearly a half million acres of annual ryegrass is now being grown over multiple states. Quantifying just how many more farmers are using annual ryegrass back east and how much more Oregon seed is being sold to them is more difficult. However, there seems to be plenty of anecdotal evidence. At least two Oregon seed companies now have sales staff dedicated to the Midwest market.

"I'm getting more phone calls and e-mails from farmers interested in trying annual ryegrass as a cover crop," says Towery. "They'll pay for a quality product with quantified benefits."

The price of seed, like so many other commodities, has gone up. It is hard to attribute price increases to a greater demand elsewhere in the U.S., but the emerging market certainly can't hurt Oregon grass seed growers. Increased prices are tempered by a hike in input costs. Midwest farmers need to see if benefits outweigh costs.

As more time passes, those benefits have become more clear. Towery is excited, but offers a caution.

"We want to do an even better job of documenting increased yields and other benefits to show Midwest growers that it is cost effective to plant annual ryegrass," he says. "But it's just one piece of the whole production system that needs to be done correctly. Sometimes weather will throw a curve and growers need to understand how to deal with that when using annual ryegrass."

So the education of growers continues as does the research. If Oregon grass seed growers can produce enough of the varieties that prove to work best in harsh climates, the acreage planted in annual ryegrass back east will rise significantly over the next few years and provide a market that is well worth the effort.

For more information, contact Bruce Pokarney at (503) 986-4559.