

## Perceptions of cover crops in Washington and Idaho's Palouse region: summary of focus group findings

**Purpose:** Research indicates significant agronomic and economic challenges associated with cover crop integration in the inland Pacific Northwest, yet there is less understood about how stakeholders view ways to integrate cover crops. To better understand opportunities for cover crop adoption, we conducted eight focus groups with 61 producers, university researchers, private industry employees and conservation staff at the 2019 Alternative Cropping Symposium. We asked participants: 1) *What comes to mind when you hear the term “alternative crop” versus “cover crop”?*; 2) *What do you consider a primary reason for using cover crops?*; and 3) *If you were to consider using (or promoting) a cover crop, what would it take to integrate them into current management practices?*



*Photo: Palouse Conservation District- participants taking part in the focus groups at the 2019, Alternative Cropping Symposium*

**Findings:** according to participants, cover crops are defined as a crop planted between or in lieu of a cash crop to protect and improve soil health, and to provide forage for livestock. Alternative crops are considered a non-traditional cash crop grown for niche or alternative markets. Participants discussed that both practices share similar agronomic benefits but cover crops were not frequently associated with short or long-term profitability. In response to what it would take to integrate, or promote cover crops, focus group participants discussed the need for increased collaboration and information exchange between researchers, conservation organizations, crop advisors and landowners. More specifically, participants identified the need for long-term, locally adapted research projects to determine the agronomic, economic, and social benefits and outcomes of cover crop use. In addition, focus groups demonstrated a broad interest in determining the feasibility of livestock integration (**Table 1**).

**Table 1: Participants discussed the need for more information on the agronomic, economic, and social feasibility of cover crop integration**

	<b>Agronomic</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>
<b>Cover Crop Use</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Planting and termination time for specific species</li> <li>- Inter-seeding/cropping options</li> <li>- Short and long-term impact on: <i>pH, microbial activity, yield</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analysis of short- and long-term profitability</li> <li>- Cost of seed</li> <li>- Financial impact on the following cash crop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consideration of culturally appropriate practices (i.e. historical use of cover crops and existing practices used to reduce erosion)</li> </ul>
<b>Livestock Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Infrastructure: fencing, water availability, cover crop species type and grazing times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyze short and long-term profitability in annual cropping system</li> <li>-Cost of integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitation of connections between crop and livestock producers</li> </ul>

**Recommendations: participants discussed needs for future research on the integration of cover crops in the Palouse region. Based on these discussions, we recommend the following:**

<b>Conservation organizations and agencies</b>	Make recommendations that are practical for the producer, economically feasible, and suitable for regional cropping systems.  Identify and consolidate local innovator knowledge. Publicize and share trial examples (positive and negative) with other farmers and local and regional media sources.  Facilitate farmer-farmer networks and support collaboration and information sharing between farmers, crop advisors and landowners to communicate about the short and long-term impacts of cover crops.
<b>Researchers and local conservation organizations</b>	Prioritize farmer informed research questions and include farmers as co-investigators to define future research projects and desired outcomes.
<b>Crop and livestock producers</b>	Collaborate and communicate with neighbors and peers and share trial results (positive and negative) with landowners, conservation partners, and crop advisors.
<b>Landowners</b>	Engage and communicate with producers about soil resources and land management practices
<b>Policymakers</b>	Government programs may be more successful when it acknowledges the unique challenges that farmers face within the local, historical and cultural context in which they operate. Incorporate local agronomic, economic and social conditions into policies and increase responsiveness to changing needs.
<b>Crop Advisors</b>	Collaborate with farmers and identify locally appropriate solutions that fit the unique management goals of the producers

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**University  
of Idaho**

For more information

Contact Avery Lavoie ([alavoie@uidaho.edu](mailto:alavoie@uidaho.edu), 802-363-4060) or Dr. Chloe Wardropper ([cwardropper@uidaho.edu](mailto:cwardropper@uidaho.edu)).