

# THE WALNUT & INDIAN CREEK WATERSHED

*Producer Spotlights*



## MCGREW BROTHERS FINDING SUCCESS IN COVER CROP MANAGEMENT

by Dan Case

Photograph by Dan Case

**Mills County, IA (May 14, 2021)** - As Steve McGrew climbs out of his sprayer he portrays a sense of confidence and comfort only a veteran cover cropper would have after a cold spring with tall rye. Steve and his brothers Bill, David, Robert, and a nephew Bill, planted 1,500 acres of cover crops last Fall on both corn and bean ground. Managing 1,500 acres of cover crops is no small task but Steve has found ways to make it more than manageable.

The McGrew Brothers have been experimenting with cover crops since 1992. Experiences and lessons learned have brought them to the success they are seeing today.

### OTHER NEWS AND DEADLINES:

- Sign up by July 1st for cost-share at your local SWCD to participate in cover crop fly-on program.
- Sign up by August 15th for cost-share at your local SWCD to cover crop independently.

I asked Steve how he manages his covers. Last Fall, he drilled half his acres and had an airplane seed the other half. While he prefers the drill he says the airplane is a time saver and depending on the year, can have very similar results.

He recommends wheat before corn rather than rye. Wheat, while it does overwinter, doesn't grow as fast in the spring as rye and thus doesn't have as much chance for a yield drag. Although Steve would like to apply extra fertilizer at planting, which is necessary for planting corn into tall rye, he says taking a 2-3 bushel loss on corn is well worth the benefits any cover crop provides.

He claims that his cover crops reduce his soil loss by 90% as well as store nitrogen that would have washed down his tile lines. He has done water monitoring in the past on his farm through the Iowa Soybean Association and was surprised how much he was losing. Steve equated it to a losing a semi load of nitrogen every year.

He also stated that although terraces take away acres and thus bushels from your farm, the soil they end up saving is irreplaceable. This is why terraces have become widely accepted and considered a necessity on certain landscapes. Steve says, "If you are going to beans, losing bushels is not an issue. On my farms, planting beans into two-foot tall rye isn't a problem and the beans actually have better yields."

The McGrew's do run their own sprayer, which helps tremendously with managing their covers, but he stresses that you still have to do your homework. Make sure you read the label of the chemicals you are using. Do not just assume the chemicals you have always used will do the job.

Steve has also experimented with different cover crop types. He says he has seen tremendous success with hairy vetch and bumps in corn yields, but mother nature is a big variable. A cool spring like we have had this year would not provide the growth with vetch you need to see the increases in yield.

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Cover crops take management, some of which you can only learn through experience. But don't be afraid to speak with an experienced cover cropper! You can learn a lot in the time it takes to fill a sprayer.