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Managing Farm Economics

With one of the wettest springs in state history, 2019 has been a soggy planting season. Ask any farmer how the abundant rain has affected their operation, you'll hear about fields planted twice, three times, or not at all. As so many fields sat wet and inaccessible this spring and planting deadlines approached, USDA released a "prevent plant" program, incentivizing farmers to let fields lay fallow, or plant them with cover crops. This program has given many fields and farmers a fresh opportunity to take their soil health to new levels. Highland High School's FFA Plot was one such field, usually planted in a corn and soybeans rotation. This year, agriculture educator Renee Barr and plot managers Syler and Shawn Hogg decided to turn this wet season into an educational experience for the whole community by teaming up with David Kleinschmidt of Progressive Agronomy Consulting Services. The entire five-acre agriculture education field has been planted in an 18-way cover crop mix which will be publicly demonstrated at 5 pm on Tuesday, September 10th at David Kleinschmidt's "Managing Farm Economics and Soil Productivity" event. "David and I have the same philosophy – we're soils nerds," says Barr. "This project takes a sour farming year and turns it into an educational activity AND improves our soil health." With help from NRCS soil scientist Bryan Fitch, Kleinschmidt extracted soil cores from the Highland High School farm plot and noticed the soil was poor. "This is where change begins," says Kleinschmidt, "It's understandable that farmers are nervous about taking risks, and it's hard to take the jump. I learned from Renee that if it weren't for seed and chemical donations, these five acres would never turn a profit. That's the purpose of our event in September – to physically show how this cover crop and no-till system can generate soils capable of producing better, healthier crops." Barr agrees with Kleinschmidt, "When we show improvement on our soil in a few years, it can show farmers the benefits. I want

to show students too – it's not always about the chemicals. Now we're going to see what happens when we work with nature." When it comes to conservation agronomy, David Kleinschmidt is a true ground-breaker. Graduating from SIU Carbondale with a major in Ag Business Economics and a career start in ag retail sales, David decided to venture out on his own with Progressive Agronomy Consulting Services. "In the drought of 2012, I sold a lot of cover crops to farmers looking to prevent nutrient loss from fields that couldn't produce. I started noticing the more I used cover crops, the more I saw a decrease in plant stress. Crops weren't as fast to show nutrient deficiency, had fewer weeds to compete with, and more water was available later in the season, when the crops needed it. That network of roots puts the pore space back into the soil, creating a crop-supporting structure that can breathe AND deliver water and nutrients. When we nurture soil rather than rip it apart, it can function as intended – it becomes more productive and life-giving." Now a full-time conservation agronomist, Kleinschmidt notices a lot of fascinating things that cover crops do and he takes every opportunity to share his knowledge with the public. "We all need mentors, so I partnered with Understanding Ag and Soil Health Academy. This gives me and local farmers in my community a chance to bounce ideas off of experts without fear of being judged." One such expert is Rick Clark, 2019 American Soybean Association award winner, who farms 7,000 acres of cash crops in west-central Indiana. After years of experimentation, Clark converted his entire operation to a no-till system with a diverse crop rotation that includes a wide variety of cover crops. "I'm not trying to say my system is better than anyone else's. I'm just saying that the system I'm working on is working for me and my farm, and I think it could work for other farms," says Clark, "We have got to figure out a way to stop this erosion and losing our topsoil, because it's not coming back." Clark will be a featured speaker at the Highland High School Event on September 10th, and will explain his system of farming and the benefits it has brought his farm and family. "Managing Farm Economics and Soil Productivity" is open to the public and free of charge. The event will begin at 5 pm at the Highland Highschool agricultural demonstration plot just south of Highland High School on Route 160. At the plot parking lot, David Kleinschmidt will operate a Rainfall Simulator and perform a slake test to demonstrate soil aggregate stability. Then Kleinschmidt will discuss the 18-way cover crop mix no-tilled in the plot, and some of the "invisible magic" taking place under the soil. "There's so much to talk about – so much you can't see underground, like how differently crops respond to weather and pressure systems when soil is at top function. You might notice after a high-pressure system, corn seems to have grown 6 inches overnight. When there's more porosity in the soil, water and nutrients flow better for better plant uptake," Kleinschmidt says. "Low pressure systems also cause a plant boost. Plants breath through stomata, 95% of which are on the underside of the leaves. Low pressure systems cause a carbon-dioxide release from the soil, which plants inhale and grow, above and below the soil. But with cover crops, carbon-dioxide is captured. Rather than being released freely into the atmosphere, it goes right into the plant, which works further down into the soil, feeding the essential bio-organisms and building organic matter." The second half of the program moves into Highland High School's Shop Room, where Rick Clark will present "Farm Economics – Efficient Conservation on a Large-Scale Farm". His talk centers around feasibility of a soil-building system, and the how-to's of making soil-health practices profitable. He'll talk about his crop-rotation, and how he arrived at his current cover crop cocktail, the "gunslinger". "Some of the crops in his gun-slinger mix are some of my favor-

Eleanor Schumacher



David Kleinschmidt shows drilled rows of cover crops popping-up through terminated winter cover on Highland high School 5-acre agricultural demo field.

ite cover crops. He uses sorghum sudangrass which has an effect of promoting a beneficial mycorrhizal fungi network that works to extend root reach deeper into the soil for more nutrient and water access," Kleinschmidt explains. This spring, when it seemed the rain would never end, Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District hosted an Agricultural Steering Committee meeting, inviting Kleinschmidt to present as a guest speaker. Local farmer and Madison County Farm Bureau Director Kevin Rutz decided to test Kleinschmidt's claim that fields with growing cover crops would be ready to plant sooner than saturated, muddy fields that had been tilled just before storms. "We had just had a lot of rain, and my cereal rye was tall. I went out into that field and low and behold, it was ready for no-till. The cover crops took up the water, and the soil was ready." The "Managing Farm Economics and Soil Productivity" event will be hosted with support from Madison County Soil & Water Conservation District and Madison County Planning and Development. Catered dinner will be served at 7:30 pm. Registration is limited and those interested in attending should call David Kleinschmidt at (217) 370-3799 by Wednesday, September 4th.