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Cover crops coming to a Corn Belt field near you?
Cover crops catching on with Midwest growers, says
Commodity Classic team

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Annual ryegrass and other cover crops are gaining popularity with Midwest crop producers, say seed growers. At the Commodity Classic trade show in Anaheim this week, farmers spent time talking with several representatives of the Oregon Ryegrass industry.

"We think there's quite a bit of potential for annual ryegrass in the Midwest," said Larry Venell, a seed producer from Corvallis, Oregon. Venell, who grows sweet corn, green beans, clover and other crops as well as grass seed, says the greatest interest is coming from no-till producers who are seeing a number of distinct benefits from cover crops.

At the trade show booth, Dan Towery, who represents the ryegrass commission in Oregon, touted eight main benefits from annual ryegrass as a cover crop. "A leading benefit is that the cover crop does a good job of breaking up soil compaction," Towery said. The cover crop also promotes nutrient cycling and is good nitrogen scavenger, he added.



Larry Venell (left) talks with a farmer during the Commodity Classic trade show on Thursday. "We think there's quite a bit of potential for annual ryegrass in the Midwest," Venell says. (photo by John Walter).

Ryegrass cover crops can boost corn and soybean yields, too, especially in years of dry weather, he said.

Venell and Towery pointed to recent university and on-farm trials showing that annual ryegrass can significantly reduce soybean cyst nematode populations.

Growers are increasingly experimenting with aerial seeding,

usually after the beans turn yellow and the corn starts to dry down. Typical seed rates are 15 to 20 pounds an acre, at a cost of about 75 cents a pound.

Some growers have had good success mixing cover crops, like annual ryegrass and crimson clover, which provides complementary benefits. "Along with the legume, ryegrass is a nitrogen scavenger. We're seeing the cover crop fixing 135 pounds of nitrogen," Towery said.

"The benefits easily pay for the cost of the cover crop," Venell added.