



Dealing with Run-Away Cover Crops

6/4/2019

Whether or not the ideas in this article are useful to you, or whether you employ other solutions to get crops planted this spring, one item is true in all cases - a big cover crop will soak up the soil nitrogen. You should take extra steps to insure your emerging crop is not nitrogen deprived. Either, additional N broadcast prior to incorporating the green manure, or additional N in a band at planting.

That said, the big question is: How do I handle huge amounts of cover crop biomass and what do I need to do to get good seed to soil contact? A good answer to this question is critical. Planting late into wet soils is already costing yield. You sure don't want to make things worse by having marginal stands.

How much green material is too much depends on planter capabilities and your capability to incorporate it. Many tools like high speed discs, rotovators, or conventional discs could work if there's minimal top growth. Livestock farmers may have the option to mow their cover crop. If there's not enough time to let it dry down for hay, it could be cut and harvested quickly for silage or baleage. Incorporating what's left is greatly simplified. No-tilling into the stubble may even be a possibility.

If harvesting your cover crop is not an option, it may be possible to no-till into shredded residues, if your planter can sweep that material away and get seed in good contact with the soil. Possibly, run a tedder or light tillage equipment to bust up matted residues and dry them out a bit. Alternatively, tillage after chopping, could do a good job of getting heavy residues mixed into the soil.

But beware, seed, especially corn seed, planted into ground where large amounts

of organic matter are actively decomposing often suffers. Emerging seeds can become casualties when they germinate in an environment that is "hot" from decomposition. The classic way to avoid this situation has been to wait a couple weeks after incorporation to let the firestorm of decomposition die down and allow soils to regain their equilibrium. Unfortunately, this year growers can't wait, and there are instances where planting into surface tilled ground *the same day* has worked. In other words, plant the acres you tilled this morning, in the afternoon of the same day.

There may be scenarios where no-till planting into the standing cover crop is feasible. Planting into the standing cover crop, then coming back immediately and cutting down the cover crop for hay, may be a possibility. Rake it the day after cutting to accelerate drying. If haying is not an option, shred it right after planting and run a tedder or light tillage equipment the next day to dry out and spread what was cut so it doesn't block emergence. The use of flamers, electric zappers or organic herbicides as a pre-emerge burndown may have possibilities. Or, even rolling the cover crop down, assuming that alone will kill the cover crop, then planting is a practice successfully employed by some.

Yet, given how difficult all of the above will be to execute, it may be wise to broadcast fertilize, chop the cover crop, and moldboard plow it. Plow it as deep as possible without bringing up big wet slabs of soil. It will likely be fairly shallow plowing, but it does need to be deep enough to allow a field cultivator or similar tool to create the seed bed.

Whatever you do, please keep in mind these two basic principals:

- Heavy cover crops take away N from young plants.
- Good yields depend upon good stands. Good stands depend upon good seed to soil contact.

Don't hesitate to call AgriEnergy if we can help you think things through for your farm. 815.872.1190.