

Capturing indigenous knowledge of small grains production

Abstract: Many Iowa farmers lack the knowledge base to grow small grains successfully. This grant supported visits and interviews with farmers across Iowa during small grains field operations in 2014. The goal was to capture the nuts and bolts of small grains production in both conventional and organic systems to facilitate greater adoption of these sustainable systems.

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Farmers shared answers regarding their production methods and their solutions to logistical issues. Their knowledge was passed along in articles, webinars, field days, and conference presentations.



CROSS-CUTTING

What was done and why?

Diversification of cropping systems has been touted as a strategy for balancing productivity, profitability and environmental health.

This idea is supported in part by recent Leopold Center-funded work investigating extended crop rotations. Adding a small grain to a corn-soybean cropping system is a simple, incremental step that can make a farming system more sustainable.

Farmers with conventional corn-soybean systems tell Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) that they are not confident in their background and ability to grow small grains. In the distant past, these crops were grown on most Iowa farms, but that has not been the case for the last two generations. The traditional chain of farmer knowledge—passed on from generation to generation—regarding successful small grains production has largely been broken on Iowa farms. Farmers interested in growing small grains today often have no one, not family or a neighbor, to turn to for advice. PFI hopes to bridge this knowledge gap by capturing and sharing what has been learned by Iowa farmers who grow small grains.

What did we learn?

Farmer knowledge of small grains practices was captured and details and narrative can be referenced through 11 publications, archived “farminars” and PFI annual conference content. The PI’s team conducted five “farminars” that were viewed by 731 people; 35 farmers attended the small grains session at the PFI Cooperators’ Meeting; four field days with small grains topics were attended by 246 people; and annual conference sessions featuring a small grains focus were attended by 408 people. In total, 1,420 people have accessed the small grains information and outreach generated as part of this grant.

Farmers say that lack of knowledge is a major barrier to including small grains in the crop rotation. The small grains farmers interviewed for this project suggest that those new to small grains shouldn’t hesitate to give them a try. Small grains can be successfully established with a several types of equipment: planter, seed drill, and broadcast, either terrestrially or aerially. It has been suggested that any farmer who is successful with corn and bean best management practices can achieve success with small grains. As with adopting any new agricultural practice, farmers new to small grains should start with a modest amount of acreage.