

Cover crops following maize and other late harvested crops

Funding is offered for establishment of a fast-growing cover crop that reduces nutrient runoff and leaching from land that would normally be left bare or down to stubbles during winter. It will reduce surface runoff and the risk of potential pollutants, such as sediment, pesticides and nutrients, being leached to groundwater or carried to nearby watercourses. Cover crops also improve soil health and increase water infiltration.

Length of agreement available

September / October 2024 until 31st March 2025.

Requirements:

- Where to use this measure:
 - Only on cultivated land where the crop prior to the cover crop was a maize crop (or other late harvested crop).
- Sow a fast-growing and dense cover crop by *15th October* to provide dense ground cover and protect the land from overwinter soil erosion and nutrient runoff / leaching.
- Retain the cover crop until at least *15th January* if the following crop is combinable and until at least *1st March* if the following crop is maize. Once destroyed, aim to establish the following spring crop within 6 weeks.
- Grass may be used as a cover crop but only where it will be kept no longer than *31st May* in the year after establishment.
- If soil compaction has not been remediated upon inspection, funding may be withdrawn or reduced.
- Estimates of the nutrients released by the cover crop should be used in nutrient planning for the following crop to ensure there is no over application or excess availability of nutrients, which may subsequently leach or runoff.

Choice of cover crop

- A mix or a single species may be used, but crops should be suitable for autumn sowing, fast growing and mainly frost tolerant to provide adequate ground cover overwinter
- The main species should be Italian ryegrass, Westerwolds, rye, barley or oats. The minimum seed rate used for grasses should be 35kg/ha and for cereals 100kg/ha.
- Brassicas such as oil/fodder radish and mustard may be used as the main species but only if established before *15th September*. If used as the main or only cover crop species the minimum seed rate of oil/fodder radish should be 20kg/ha and for mustard 10kg/ha if drilled, or 12 kg/ha if broadcast.
- Other species such as clover and vetches may also be included in the mix. The seed rate of a mix of cover crop species should be sufficient to provide dense ground cover within a few weeks of establishment.

How to establish the cover crop

- If ground conditions are suitable, remove any areas of soil compaction, but do not subsoil over archaeological features.
- Sow the cover crop within 2 weeks of harvesting and no later than *15th October*.
- Establish either by (i) direct drilling or (ii) cultivating and then drilling or broadcasting.
- Avoid overworking the soil, establish in as coarse seedbed as practical and avoid over-consolidation.
- Sow at a suitable seed rate to provide a dense groundcover and to prevent soil erosion (see seed rates above).

Buffer strip requirement

- A grass buffer strip of at least 6m width must be in place against all watercourses (including ditches), roads, tracks and neighbouring properties, or where there is an identified run-off flow pathway. If a buffer strip is not already in place it must be established by the time that the cover crop is drilled. Where buffer strips do not currently exist, establishment and retention of new buffers to accompany cover crops may be eligible for funding through the Arable Reversion option of the scheme.

Restrictions

- Cover crops after maize **cannot** be funded in high-risk fields which are not appropriate for growing maize in. Please note that if your application for this measure is successful, your scheme advisor can assess the risk of soil erosion and run-off on your maize ground and can make recommendations on how to mitigate these risks. Scheme advisors are also able to provide site specific advice on maize variety maturity group selection to help ensure the deadlines below are met. Please contact your scheme advisor to discuss. Also see record keeping section below.
- Cover crops funded by any other scheme such as Countryside Stewardship or future schemes such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive are **not** eligible
- **Do not** graze the cover crop without the prior agreement of a scheme advisor. Grazing may only be considered as a form of destruction at the end of the term and by agreement with a Wessex Water advisor.
- **Do not** apply any organic manures or artificial fertiliser to the cover crop, or prior to its establishment. No organic manures for the following spring crop should be applied before *14th February*.
- **Do not** establish the following crop without calculating the nutrient content of soil, any manures applied and the available nutrients from the cover crop residue. Apply no more nutrients than the crop requires.
- Forage crops grown for grazing (such as stubble turnips or kale) and cash crops grown to be harvested (such as oilseed rape and lucerne) are **not** eligible.
- Cover crops **cannot** be funded in situations where the management of the field is in breach of the Farming Rules for Water or Nitrate Vulnerable Zone rules (if applicable). Successful applicants are required to sign the declaration described in the record keeping section below.

Record keeping and payment terms

Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them with *the payment claim*. Payment will only be made upon satisfactory receipt of all of the following records:

- Photographs of each cover cropped field taken on any day in *December 2024*.
- Soil analysis results (pH, P and K as a minimum) for the relevant fields dated within the past 3 years.
- Farm and field information needed to run a phosphorus loss tool for the farm and calculate the reduction in phosphorus loss to water arising from this work. This will include farm data relating to livestock numbers, cropping areas and fertiliser / manure inputs.
- Self-declaration that the terms of the project agreement have been adhered to (*key terms are listed above*).
- Successful applicants are required to sign a declaration confirming that:
 - reasonable precautions are taken to prevent nutrients and soil from the relevant field entering watercourses or from being leached to groundwater - to an extent that could cause pollution.
 - the relevant fields have not been (i) the source of a recorded pollution incident which could have been prevented by the farmer taking reasonable precautions to prevent that pollution and/or (ii) the subject of a warning, fine, prosecution or BPS deduction issued to the farmer by the Environment Agency or RPA for a breach of NVZ rules or Farming Rules for Water in the past 5 years.
- It is expected that to support and inform the above declaration, successful applicants will complete the Environment Agency's Agricultural Compliance Tool (ACT) by 31st December in each year of the agreement and submit it when completed to Wessex Water (who will hold it in confidence) and address any actions identified by the ACT. For agreements involving annual payments of more than 5 years duration and/or with a value in excess of £5,000 of annual payments, this is a requirement.
- Agreement holders are required to complete a Wessex Water supplier application form in order to receive their first payment. A copy of this is available on the scheme website.
- Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them *on request*:
 - Field operations at the field parcel level, including associated invoices



Italian ryegrass cover crop established immediately after harvest of forage maize