

Stewardship Tool For Farmers: Adding Native Perennials in Low-yielding Cropland Areas or Edges

Prairie ecosystems have some of the richest soils, that are black, porous, full of nutrients which provide habitat for a diverse array of insects, birds and mammals. Tilling has caused the quality and many of those nutrients to be lost in the soils. Over the past 20 years, no-till practices have begun the slow recovery of soil organic carbon. Although the soils have started to rebound, biodiversity on the prairies has continued to decline. The use of pesticides, herbicides, and the loss of habitat have led to reductions in insect and bird populations. The quality of waterways and wetlands has also decreased, under the influence of erosion and fertilizer runoff.

To address the issue of soil loss and nutrient runoff, Iowa State University has

been researching adding native perennial species to cropland since 2007 in their STRIPS (Science-based Trails of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips) project. They have found that planting just 10% of cropland, either in-field or on the edge of fields, with native prairie species can drastically reduce soil loss and nutrient runoff. Researchers have found that small patches can make a big difference, where the multifunctional benefits of the native prairie strips outweigh the loss of cropland converted. The native prairie STRIPS are native species that can withstand heavy rain, and their deep perennial roots are more effective by improving infiltration, or raising soil organic matter. The use of cool season exotic grasses planted in monocultures would not provide the same benefits

as they are weak-stemmed and tend to lay flat under heavy rain. Adding native perennials throughout cropland, in low-yield areas or along field edges may be beneficial if your goals include reducing erosion and nutrient runoff, particularly in sloped fields.

Using native, flowering, perennial plants creates more on-farm habitat for beneficial insects, such as pollinators. If additional pollinators would be beneficial to your crop yields, Stephanie Frischie, from the Xerces Society suggests to site pollinator habitat along field edges or other areas that are marginal for crop production. However, adding native vegetation and forbs interspersed through cropland as narrow strips



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may actually lead to habitat sinks for pollinators and other wildlife, where they can be harmed or killed by insecticides. Therefore, wherever the habitat is located, it is important to protect pollinator habitat from pesticide exposure through drift, soil and groundwater. Habitat can be protected from pesticide exposure through physical distance or by planting evergreen trees or grasses (which attract fewer insects) as a buffer.

We all know that farmers are working against very thin margins and with a lot of uncertainty. Reducing even 10% of their potential acres seems like it would be a gamble. However, by adding native perennials, the costs of inputs on low-yielding acres would be reduced. For mixed farm operations, the native perennials can be grazed or hayed, adding additional value.

Just like any native seed planting, adding native perennials require a modest


investment in site preparation and seed planting. Maintenance tasks include some mowing in the establishment years and spot treatment for weeds. There are programs available in certain areas that can help with the cost of seed for these native prairie perennials.

In Saskatchewan, there is the Cheerios-Xerces program supplies pollinator habitat seed mixes to farmers who are interested in using a variety of crop rotations and conservation practices, willing to plant diverse forage blends and wildflowers seed mixes, maintaining the plantings for at least 5 years, able to protect pollinator habitat from pesticide impact and interested in sharing their story with others. For more information, you can contact Stephanie Frischie at stephanie.frischie@xerces.org or 219-208-5879.

There is also funding from ALUS Canada in certain watersheds in southern Saskatchewan. Since 2006, when ALUS

Canada first started working in the Prairies, there have been improvements in 3,400 acres of grassland projects, 1,200 acres of wetland projects and 400 acres of tree projects. ALUS projects have resulted in doubling of insect species and tripling of insect abundance, significant nutrient capture, and small increases in soil carbon with much larger increases over long term. More information can be found here: <https://alus.ca/home/get-involved/participer-au-programme-alus/>

*Packing Capacity
cont. from pg. 28*

"If there's a second wave or something more extreme happens, we may be questioning things more. But right now, most people are just trying to recover with the old system to get us caught up on cattle numbers." 

SSGA 2020 AGM Resolutions

Zone 3 & 12

WHEREAS Health Canada recently released their decision on the re-evaluation on the license of strychnine for the control of Richardson's Ground Squirrels (RGS); and

WHEREAS there is currently no equivalent or adequate alternative to strychnine as an option for controlling the overpopulation of RGS on agricultural lands.

BE IT RESOLVED that the SSGA lobby the Government of Canada to reconsider their decision to cancel the registration of strychnine for the control of RGS.

Zone 4

BE IT RESOLVED that the SSGA voice its opposition to the use of the term 'meat' as a descriptive of plant based products, by partnering with other meat producing organizations such as pork, lamb, chicken and turkey and taking the opposition forward to the appropriate authorities.



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