



Farmers’ interest in cover crops continues to grow in Louisiana

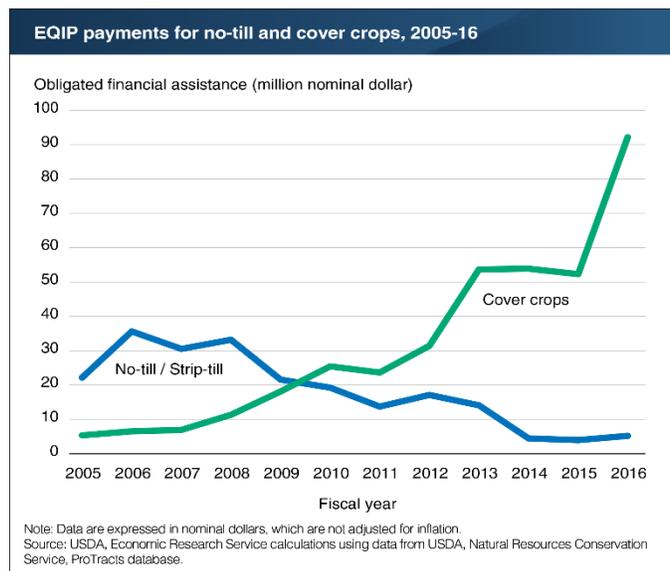
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National soil health initiatives have focused on promoting adoption of cover crops and conservation tillage practices among farmers as a measure of addressing nonpoint source pollution, weathering farming against extreme events such as drought and heavy rainfall, pest and disease suppression, etc. Although one practice is about having ground cover and the other about minimizing movement of the soil and maintaining crop residue, they both address soil structure improvement, microbial activity, soil moisture management, among others. As a soil quality management practice, they are adopted to enhance organic matter, avoid excessive tillage, manage pests, use nutrients efficiently, prevent soil compaction, keep the ground covered, and diversify cropping systems. Similarly, as a water quality practice, conservation tillage and cover cropping address sediment, nutrient, pesticide, pathogen, and salinity thereby improving waters for drinking, recreation, wildlife, fisheries, and industry.

These national initiatives are supported through conservation programs, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), where cost-share per acre payments range from \$60-\$70 per acre per year for cover crops and \$13-\$14 per acre per year for conservation tillage practices. The payments for cover crops are available for a period of five-years, whereas the payments for conservation tillage are available for a period of three-years for any individual farmer. Cover cropping and conservation tillage can be practiced jointly to receive a combined cost-share assistance, i.e., a combined payment ranging from \$73-\$84 for adopting both practices.

At the national level

From 2009 to 2015, EQIP obligations received for cover crops across the nation amounted to \$250 million, 5th highest among all EQIP obligations (GAO 2017). The amount per year increased from \$15 million in FY 2009 to \$56 million in FY 2014 and FY 2015 each. EQIP obligations for no-till were \$87 million from 2009 to 2015; however, EQIP funding decreased from \$20 million in FY 2009 to \$4 million in FY 2015. Nonetheless, this might also mean that the adoption of no-till could be happening without EQIP payments. One of the reasons for implementing a practice without the cost-share payments could be linked to the nature of the practice itself. For example, implementing no-till would require making changes to tillage equipment, which is considered a relatively permanent change. Hence, farmers would make such changes only when they are considering a permanent change to tillage practice on their farms. Hence, once obligated to

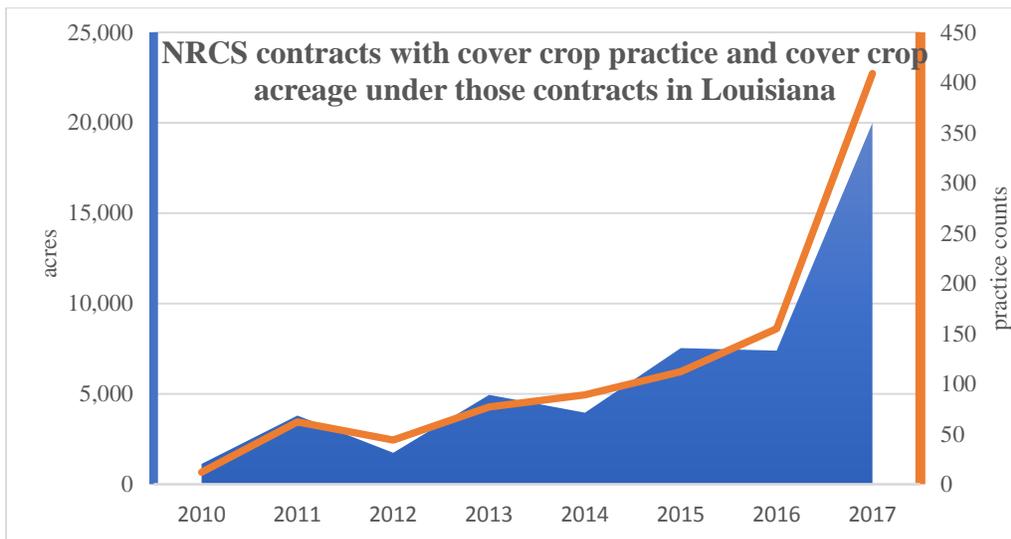


Adopted from Bowman and Wallander (2018).

implement the no-till practice, it could be assumed that farmers would continue adoption even after the land is no longer eligible for payments.

In the pelican state

A similar trend is noticed in Louisiana, where EQIP obligations for cover crops showed an upward trend, whereas, for no-till, there was no specific trend. Similarly, the number of EQIP contracts using cover crops as a soil and water quality practice showed a significant increase, i.e., the contracts that specified cover crops as part of their practices increased from 12 in 2010 to 409 in 2017, totaling around 20,000 acres of cover crops in 2017. These numbers show that Louisiana farmers are showing a similar level of interest as other states to implement these practices to achieve soil and water conservation on working lands.



Data: NRCS-RCA Report. 2018.

Despite some of the challenges such as establishment, time and labor involved, and requirements to adhere to strict [termination](#) guidelines, interest is continuously growing for these practices as farmers recognize these as important tools to improve and maintain soil health, improve water quality and reduce nutrient use. It is imperative that the upcoming farm bill fund these programs at a level that can address erosion and water quality concerns and achieve public and private benefits. With programs focused on providing farmers with a better understanding of [NRCS guidelines to implement and maximize cost-share incentives](#) for adopting cover crops and tillage practices, decision tools to estimate per acre costs to [establish and manage cover crops](#), and a whole suite of [other questions involved in cover crop implementation](#), landowners have at their disposal materials to enable informed decision-making with respect to these practices.

The Farm Bill is critical for implementation of voluntary conservation programs across the nation, encouraging partnerships to address critical natural resource issues and providing economic impact through agriculture-related jobs. Any cuts to the voluntary conservation programs would be devastating for rural America.