

Iowa Ag Secretary Bill Northey Explores Aerial Seeding of Cover Crops with Peoples Company

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Peoples Company in early September set the stage for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey to fuel some boots-on-the-ground dialogue surrounding the use of targeted land conservation practices on Iowa farmland.

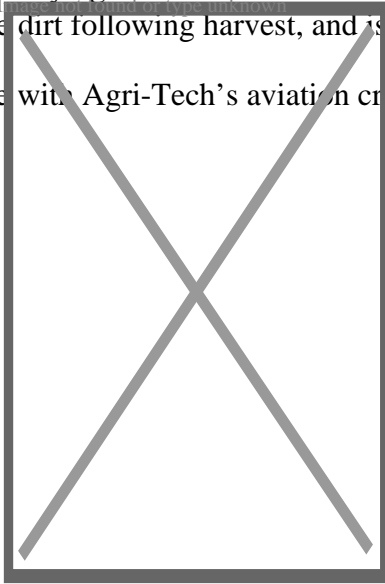
The field day began with Northey stepping onto the tarmac at Osceola Municipal Airport to visit with Peoples Company President Steve Bruere and Land Manager Mollie Aronowitz as employees of Indianola-based Agri-Tech Aviation Inc. loaded winter rye seed into an Air Tractor 402 idling on a runway. The seed would later be aerially applied on a 150-acre demonstration farm managed by [Peoples Company](#) just south of the airport.

Northey, an Iowa native and fourth-generation farmer who in January 2015 will begin serving his third consecutive term as the [state's agriculture chief](#), said the practice of sowing cover crops is taking hold with greater numbers of landowners and producers looking into the positive and lasting effects of limiting nutrient runoff, stifling erosion and increasing organic matter. He visits annually with farmers and industry leaders in each of Iowa's 99 counties to better understand how they are maximizing breakthroughs in science and exploring the potential for innovative technologies intended to protect air, water and land.

“There have always been some folks who’ve done a little bit with cover crops, but we see the interest really growing,” Northey said. “We think we’ve doubled the number of cover crops each of the last few years. It’s still a small number in Iowa. It’s a great practice for the field and controlling erosion. Certainly has the possibility of creating some organic matter, as well. But it’s a great water quality practice. [Iowa State’s research](#) will show about a 30 percent reduction in the amount of phosphorus leaving the farm, and another 30 percent in the average amount of nitrogen leaving a farm on an average year with a cover crop planted.”

The preservation of organic material and a reduction in nutrient leaching are among the primary benefits associated with laying down a winter cover crop such as cold-hardy rye, which can be aerially seeded or drilled into the dirt following harvest, and is typically killed off using a herbicide the following spring.

Northey spoke with Agri-Tech’s aviation crew – who shared their perspective on what works or what



doesn’t in the air and on the field – before a pilot departed and engaged GPS-

guidance technology to help ensure as complete coverage as possible as he lined up to spray the rye on a field of standing corn a few miles away.

Aronowitz, who has a diverse background in Midwest agriculture, horticulture and her own family’s Iowa farming operation, watched as the conversation went beyond the face value of cover crops – in terms of their ability to control erosion and build soil – and to the future importance of documenting both the methods and results of land conservation practices today.

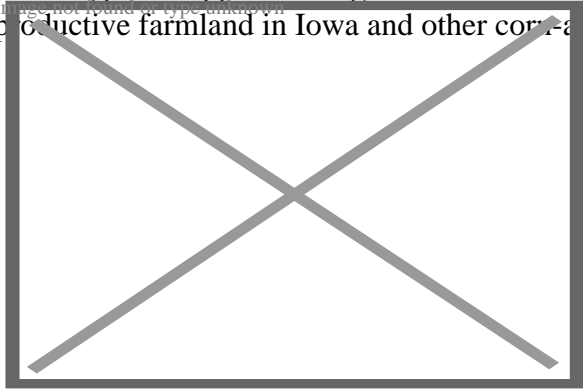
“A standard measuring matrix can help,” she said. “But what’s good on one farm isn’t always the best for another. Whether we’re talking about cover crops, tilling practices or fertilizer application timing, it all depends on variables such as soil type, slope and location in the state. By collecting and comparing research, we will ultimately allow farmers and managers to make more informed decisions when it comes to crop intelligence. We can set benchmarks and begin to evaluate which collection of practices is expected to have the greatest net-positive impact on individual farms.”

Northey, discounting any notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to land management, acknowledged that there is plenty of room for creativity and innovation in the farmland marketplace. Some of technologies that are introduced will work. Others will not. “None of these tools are universal,” he said. “That’s why we need decision-makers. It’s not like the government can just say, ‘Hey everybody does this.’ It’s needs to be the right thing, in the right place, for the right operation. We are all going to learn from each other as we have field days. We’ll target these pieces based on the operator, based on the land.”

He compared caring for the land with the keeping maintenance records on a car or pickup truck. “Picture two vehicles sitting side-by-side,” Northey said. “They may have been taken care of. May look the same. But if one has maintenance records, and you are able to understand what happened to that vehicle over the past five

years, you have more trust. First of all, you know what did happen. But second, you know that someone cared for it.”

Bruere sees collaboration as a critical piece, too, as well as a need to properly capture and share the results of land conservation practices; tasks that fall squarely into the wheelhouse of today’s farm producer or land manager. “The necessity of capturing and communicating fertility history is growing right along with investor interest in farmland,” he said. “Landowners have never been in a stronger position to [leverage technology and information](#) to gain valuable insights into the history and future predictability of their land. These types of applications go hand-in-hand with profitability, sustainability of and the appreciation of productive farmland in Iowa and other corn- and-soybean producing states.”



Northey, who said research and communication are key

elements to the success of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy program, anticipates that in time cover crops will become even more of “an economic driver for farmers, in addition to the water quality benefits.”

He recalled how earlier this year a sense of pride and accomplishment swept recently over his friends in Washington County, following the addition of cover crops to their annual rotations of corn and soybeans. “They’d go out right after rain and watch water flow off the field,” Northey said. “In some cases it was too much water, to be able to all be soaked in. The water coming off those cover crop fields was clean; it had no soil in it or almost no soil in it. It gave them a lot of pride. They were holding that soil in place. They were doing the right thing. And they were maintaining the long-term productivity, as well, of that farm.”

Aronowitz said Peoples Company embraces conservation practices throughout tillable and non-tillable managed acres with a goal of minimizing soil erosion in all farming operations and mitigating the impacts of soil or productivity loss on a farm’s balance sheet. The Iowa State University graduate said everyone has a part to play and that it is people coming together from all areas of the agriculture industry that will have the greatest impact on uncovering new innovations in soil conservation – while at the same time improving water quality.

“This is no longer just an issue important to a handful of small farmers,” she said. “It is the future of how we farm and buy or sell land here.”

“We’re no longer thinking in black-and-white,” Bruere said. “This is about managing for the future and managing for long-term appreciation more so than the cash return piece. You have to start with one farm first and make it work before you can scale it. You have to document that it’s working. You have to communicate that.”

“To be able to show that the folks managing this farm went above and beyond the simple practice of getting the crop in and getting the crop out of the ground – and sold – can create value in that farm beyond just what the soil looks like or where it sits,” Northey said. “A company reaching out and being a part of this is very important. This is how we learn the pieces that will get us to that better information 10 years from now.”