Ducks Unlimited Promotes Cover Crops and Regenerative Agriculture

Over nine million acres of cropland are planted to corn and soybeans every year in the portion of eastern South Dakota considered to be a high priority landscape for waterfowl. Ducks are attracted to this landscape because it is filled with an abundance of small prairie pothole wetlands. These extremely productive wetlands are rich with aquatic foods needed by breeding waterfowl and other wildlife. However, the native grasslands that most of these ducks would have naturally used as nesting cover have largely been converted to cropland primarily planted to corn and soybeans. Ducks are programmed to establish nests in thick grasslands, not bare fields being planted to row crops. “Up until a couple years ago, you would have been laughed at by waterfowl biologists if you would have suggested ducks would nest in a soybean or corn field”, observed Steve Donovan, DU’s Manager of Conservation Programs in the state.

According to Donovan, corn and soybeans are typically planted into a recently tilled field and the resulting bare soil is not conducive to attract nesting ducks. However, something has happened in the last several years that appears to be challenging this long-standing assumption. The agricultural world is starting to embrace “regenerative agriculture” as a means to improve soil health.

The basic concepts of this new strategy include a reduction in tillage, planting more diverse crops and using cover crops. It is not uncommon now to see a farmer planting soybeans into knee high green cover crops. The cover crops protect his soil, reduce fertilizer costs, improve organic matter levels which will increase water storage capability and provide wildlife habitat, including grassland cover sufficient to attract ducks looking for a place to nest. “It’s exciting and definitely a game changer”, according to DU’s agronomist Brad Schmidt. “Farmers are adopting these practices because it improves their bottom line by reducing input costs while protecting yields and also provides long-term benefits to soil health.” he added.

A research project partially funded by DU is looking at the benefits of cover crops to nesting birds, primarily waterfowl. Initial results are promising. Duck nests are being found in cover crops. “There remains a lot to learn about cover crops and nesting birds, but we are excited about the initial results”, added Donovan, who firmly believes that the development of new and improved farming practices, including the use of precision planting equipment, will further improve nest success rates in cover crops by reducing the number of nests accidently destroyed by planting equipment.

Regenerative agriculture just might be the answer to achieving these goals.