



## Winter Event Recap

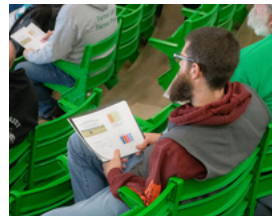


*Tim Prosser shares data that was collected from the no-till transition plots on his farm.*

On Wednesday, February 11, a great crowd gathered at the UW Arlington Agricultural Research Station to hear from Dane Demo Farm farmers about their farms' special projects, learn about supporting beneficial insects, and enjoy a keynote talk from our Minnesota neighbor, Tom Cotter.

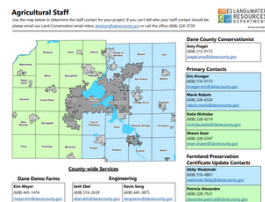
Farmers shared updates from several on-farm projects, including a nutrient stratification study, lime stratification study, manure placement project, cover crops in low-lying acres, and a no-till transition study (more details on page 4). UW-Madison researcher, Dr. Francisco Arriaga, and graduate student Connor (*continued on page 2*)

## In this Issue



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This annual event brings farmers and researchers together to share ideas



### Dane County Land Conservation Retirements Page 2-3

Three retirements in Land Conservation change up who to call.



### Research Feature: No-Till Transition Study Page 4-5

Learn more about what we learned in the first year transition to no-till study



### UW Publication: Termination Timing Tradeoffs Page 6-7

Helpful guide for making cover crop mgmt decisions



## Winter Event Recap (continued from page 1)

Schoelzel added a deeper dive into several of the farmer-led projects and shared a summary of early findings from the cover crop termination project being hosted across all of the demo farms (see the **Data Summary** insert).

After lunch, attendees heard about Dr. Dane Elmquist's work focused on beneficial insects. Elmquist shared that slug and beneficial insect monitoring took place on three of the demo farms in 2025. Those farms were chosen because they represent a "gradient" of cover crop adoption: one farm is new to cover crops and no-till, the second has been using these practices for about eight years, and the third has been using cover crops and no-till for multiple decades. The length of time a farm had used these practices made a noticeable difference in how many beneficial insects were captured. Timing mattered, too—the later the cover crop was terminated in spring, the higher the number of beneficial insects.



*Beneficial insects trapped on participating demo farms.*

The event wrapped up with a talk from Tom Cotter, farmer from Minnesota and member of the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition, who shared his soil health journey. He encouraged farmers to think about management decisions as having "negatives" and "positives," and to balance any negatives with targeted positives. For example, tillage may sometimes be necessary, but he emphasized it should be done with a clear, specific purpose. Practices like adding cover crops and diversifying rotations can help tip the balance in a positive direction.

**His bottom line: no matter the system, there's always something we can do to improve.** We can all come up with reasons a practice won't work, but if the goal is better soil health, it often comes down to mindset and taking the next step. He closed with a question for the group: "Are you going to work with Mother Nature, or against her?"—because in his experience, the more we work with her, the better off our soils, farms, and communities will be.



*Above: Microscope with insects*

*Above: Tom Cotter, guest speaker and farmer from Minnesota*

*Right: Fresh grilled burgers were served at the event, thanks to the help from Dane Co. staff members Marie and Abby*



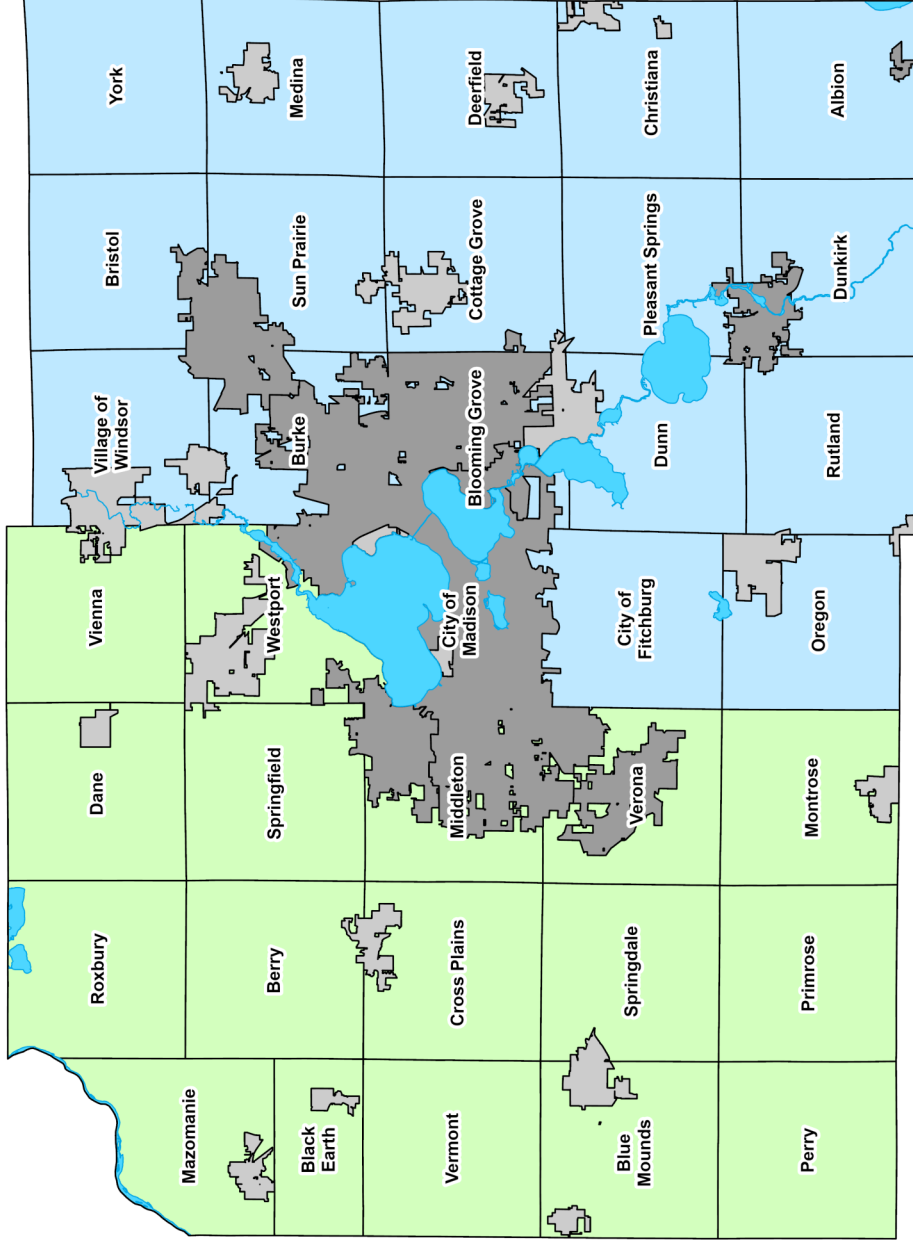
## Dane County Staffing Update

The Dane County Land Conservation Division has had several retirements over the past year. At this time, those positions will not be refilled. If you've worked with Curt Diehl, Steve Ottelien, or Laurie Lambert, they have now retired.

The good news: we're still here to help. Please refer to the map on page 3 to find the right contact for your area and needs.

# Agricultural Staff

Use the map below to determine the staff contact for your project. If you can't tell who your staff contact should be, please email our Land Conservation email inbox [landcon@danecounty.gov](mailto:landcon@danecounty.gov) or call the office (608) 224-3730.



## County-wide Services

### Dane Demo Farms

**Kim Meyer**  
 (608) 445-1474  
[meyer.kim@danecounty.gov](mailto:meyer.kim@danecounty.gov)

### Engineering

**Seth Ebel**  
 (608) 516-2639  
[ebel.seth@danecounty.gov](mailto:ebel.seth@danecounty.gov)

**Kevin Seng**  
 (608) 445-3875  
[seng.kevin@danecounty.gov](mailto:seng.kevin@danecounty.gov)

## Dane County Conservationist

**Amy Piaget**  
 (608) 212-9172  
[piaget.amy@danecounty.gov](mailto:piaget.amy@danecounty.gov)

## Primary Contacts

<b>Eric Krueger</b> (608) 516-9173 <a href="mailto:krueger.eric@danecounty.gov">krueger.eric@danecounty.gov</a>
<b>Marie Raboin</b> (608) 228-6324 <a href="mailto:raboin.marie@danecounty.gov">raboin.marie@danecounty.gov</a>
<b>Katie Nicholas</b> (608) 228-6219 <a href="mailto:nicholas.katie@danecounty.gov">nicholas.katie@danecounty.gov</a>
<b>Shawn Esser</b> (608) 228-6347 <a href="mailto:esser.shawn@danecounty.gov">esser.shawn@danecounty.gov</a>

## Farmland Preservation

## Certificate Update Contacts

<b>Abby Wadzinski</b> (608) 516-4861 <a href="mailto:wadzinski.Abby@danecounty.gov">wadzinski.Abby@danecounty.gov</a>
<b>Patricia Alexandre</b> (608) 228-7521 <a href="mailto:alexandre.patricia@danecounty.gov">alexandre.patricia@danecounty.gov</a>

# No-Till Transition Study: Prosser Farm

Tim Prosser operates a dairy farm in the northeast part of Dane County. With his family—plus his dog, Rosco—and his dad, John, Tim milks about 100 cows and farms roughly 280 acres of crops. He’s triedd cover crops in the past, but mostly saw benefits as forage. And with the variable soils in the Town of York,d tillage has long been the farm’s go-to soil management tool.

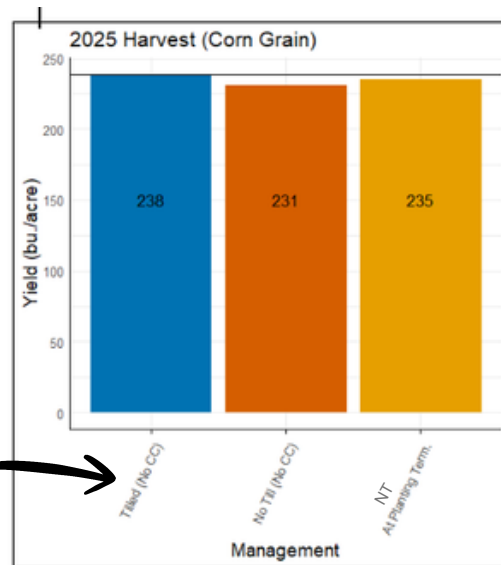
In fall 2024, Tim agreed to participate in Dane Demo Farms. One project he was especially interested ind was transitioning a field to no-till. The Demo Farms team helped set up plot strips to look not only at thed no-till transition, but also whether cover crops would help—or potentially complicate—that shift.

The five treatments include:

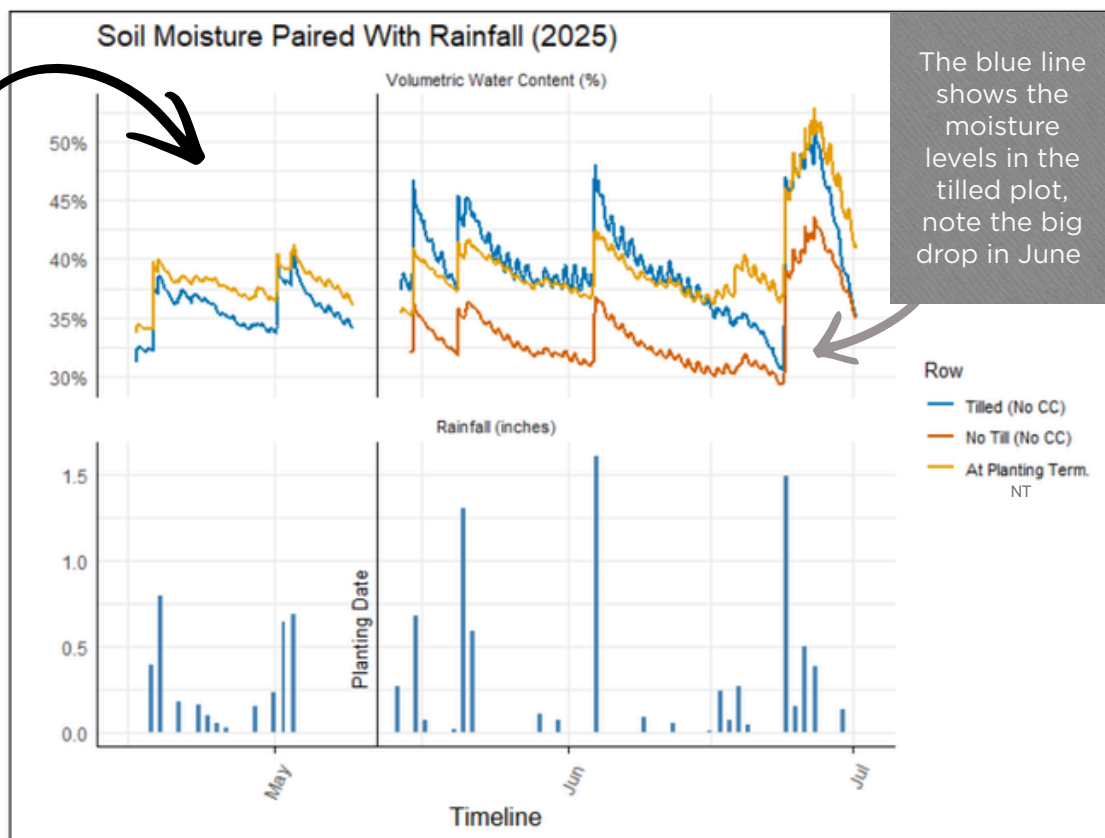
- chisel plow, no cover crops
- no-till, no cover crops
- no-till with cover crops terminated in early spring
- no-till with cover crops terminated 10-14 days before planting
- no-till with cover crops terminated at planting

The Dane Demo Farms team installed moisture and temperature sensors in each plot, collected cover crop biomass samples, and sampled monthly for plant-available nitrogen.

The first-year results surprised just about everyone. The chisel-plowed plot yielded only a couple of bushels more than the first-year no-till plot with cover crops—so the old saying “no-till, no yield” didn’t really hold up here. One important thing to note is that *Tim planted the cover crops in late October which resulted in easy to manage cover crops at spring planting time.*



**What stood out most were the moisture readings, especially from late spring into early summer.** The data showed the tilled soil didn’t hold moisture as long as the no-till and no-till-with-cover-crop plots. After a rain, soil moisture increased across all treatments, but the tilled plot dropped back to drier conditions much faster than the plots with cover crops. (cont pg 5)



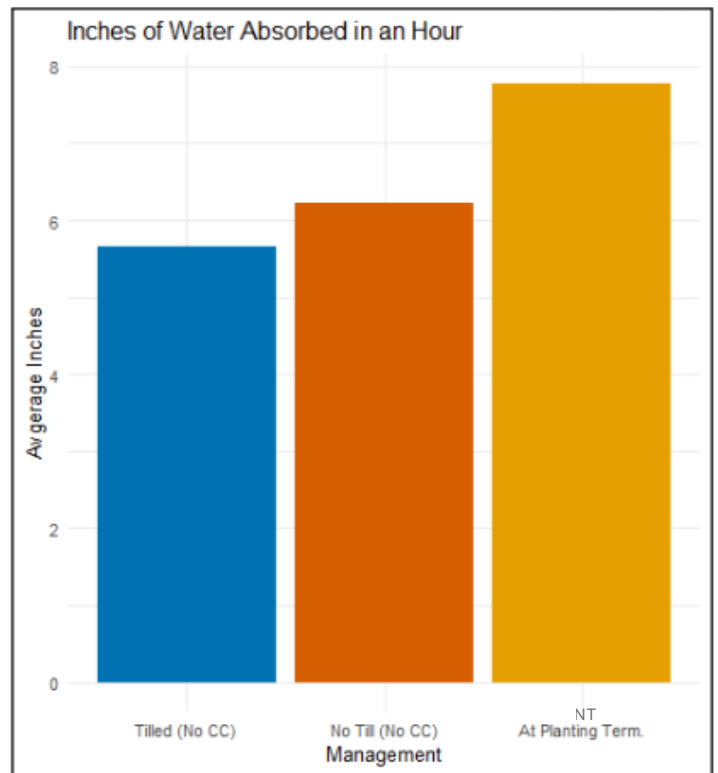
# No-Till Transition Study: Prosser Farm (continued from page 4)

Of course, 2025 gave us about as good of growing conditions as we could ask for. The real question is what this difference in water-holding capacity might mean in a tougher year—especially when timely rains don't show up.

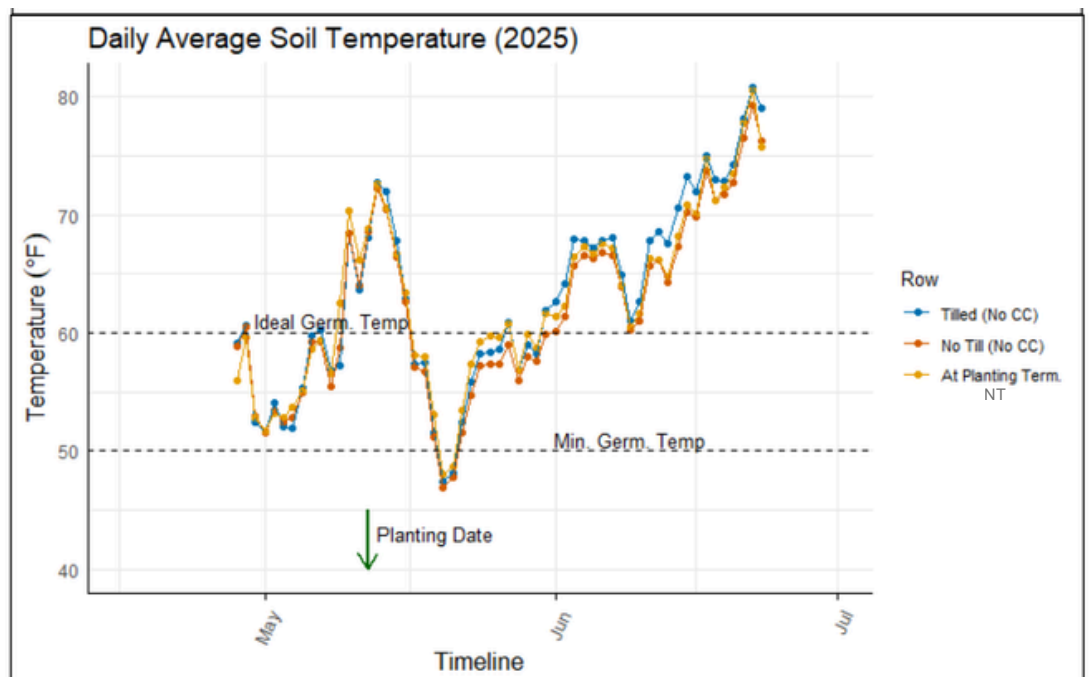
The Dane Demo Farms team also did infiltration testing in early July. Those tests showed the **no-till treatments infiltrated 1-2 more inches of water per hour than the chisel-plowed plot.**

Outside of the research strips, Tim also transitioned the rest of the field to no-till with cover crops. One thing he noticed right away: a hillside that usually doesn't yield much—because it tends to dry out every summer—held moisture better and produced a respectable yield. Was it the good weather, the shift in soil management, or a little of both? It's hard to say. The plots will help tell the real story over the coming years.

*This is only year one, but it's an important one—because you only get a “first year of no-till” once.* From here on out, those no-till acres will keep changing as the soil settles into longer-term no-till management. The project will continue tracking results over time to see how the system performs as conditions—and the soil—evolve.

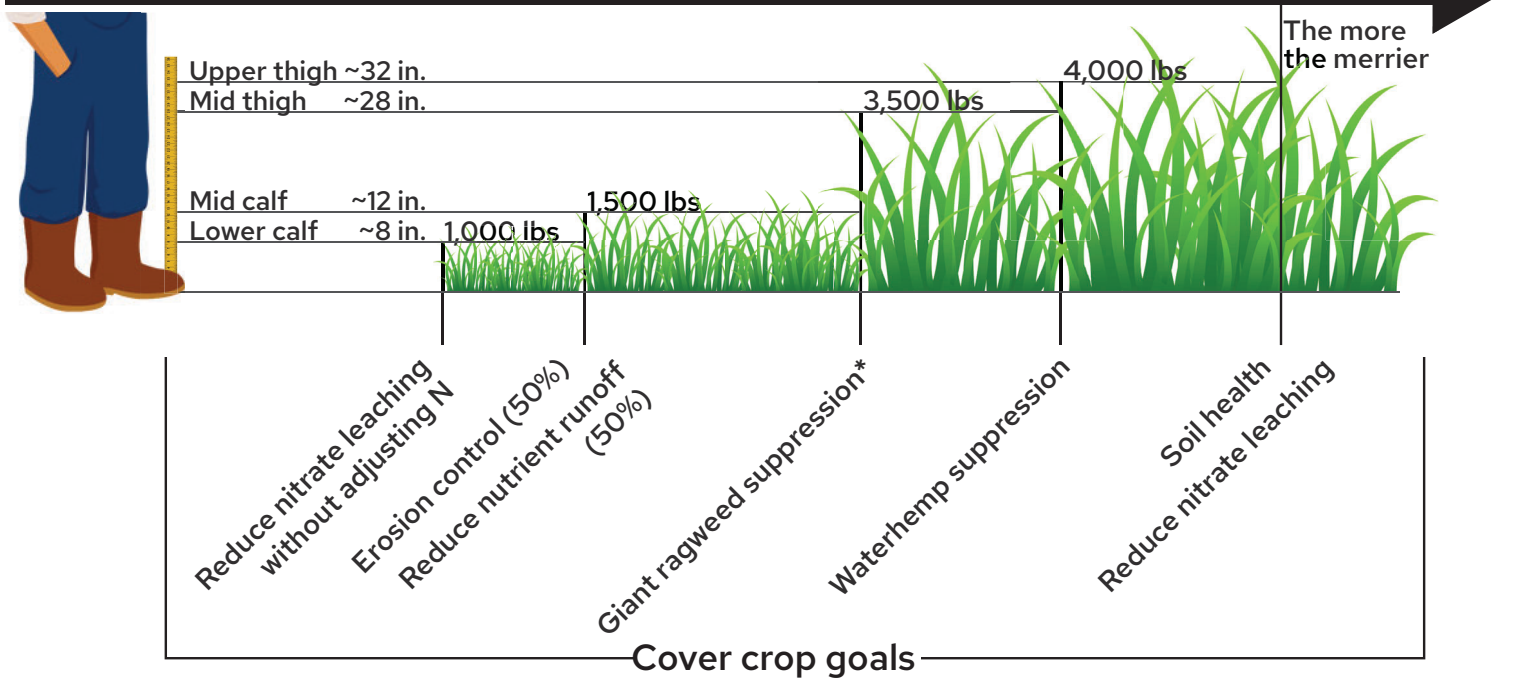


**But wait—what about cold soil temperatures at planting?** In early spring, we didn't see a big difference between treatments. To track soil temperature more closely, we installed button loggers that recorded temperatures every 15 minutes. The loggers were installed in late April, 2 inches deep.



# Biomass thresholds for cereal rye cover crop goals

## Cereal rye biomass targets (lbs dry matter/ acre)



### Reduce nitrate leaching: 1,000 lbs

- Cereal rye can mitigate nitrate leaching by drawing up excess soil nitrogen into its biomass. Research from UW-Madison's Nutrient Cycling and Agroecosystems Lab shows that if cereal rye biomass is 1,000 lbs/acre or less at the time of termination there is no need to adjust nitrogen management for the cash crop.
- Greater biomass can enhance nitrate leaching reductions, but this can lead to less available nitrogen for the following cash crop early in the growing season.

### Reducing erosion and phosphorus loss in runoff: 1,500 lbs

- Research from UW-Madison's Sustainable Soil Management lab shows that 1,500 lbs/acre of cereal rye biomass can reduce sediment and total phosphorus losses by 50% compared to no cover crop during a simulated 1.5-inch rainfall event at a rate of 3 inches per hour.
- More or less biomass might be needed depending on specific field conditions and storm events.

### Weed Suppression: 3,500 – 4,500 lbs

- Research from UW-Madison's WiscWeeds lab shows that the amount of cereal rye biomass required for weed suppression (measured 42 days after cover crop termination) depends on whether the goal is to slow weed growth or to reduce overall weed infestation.
- For waterhemp, ~2,500 lbs/acre of cereal rye biomass can reduce waterhemp biomass by 50%, indicating slower growth and reduced vigor. However, achieving a 50% reduction in the amount of waterhemp plants requires more biomass, ~4,500 lbs/acre.
- About 3,500 lbs/acre of cereal rye biomass can reduce giant ragweed biomass by 50%, while roughly 4,250 lbs/acre is needed to achieve a 50% reduction in seedling emergence.
- However, giant ragweed starts emerging in early to mid-April, a month earlier than waterhemp. It is difficult to accumulate enough cereal rye biomass by this time to suppress ragweed emergence.\*
- Planting green on time and delaying termination until VE-VC (or ~15 days after planting) is often necessary in order to accumulate this biomass in grain systems.



# Termination timing tradeoffs

When shooting for different biomass thresholds to meet cover crop goals, there are tradeoffs to be considered, especially when pushing termination later into the spring. Adaptive management is key. For example, if there is no rain in the 2-week forecast around planting time, farmers should consider terminating earlier to adapt to the risk of the cover crop's water use impeding cash crop growth. The tables below provide a rundown of the different tradeoffs stemming from cover crop termination timing by crop.

## Risk to cash crop growth legend:

	Reduced risk to cash crop, no intervention needed
	Chance of risk, likely a wash
	Elevated risk, perhaps requiring management intervention
	Risk of yield drag to the cash crop, management intervention necessary, recommended intervention

TIMING	CROP	WATER	NITROGEN	WEEDS	PLANTER	PEST/DISEASE
<b>EARLY TERMINATION</b> (14 days before planting)	<b>CORN</b>	Less water use	Starter nitrogen sufficient	Limited suppression of waterhemp <b>PRE herbicide</b>	Planter setup not critical for stand	Prevents green bridge/seedling diseases, some beneficial natural enemies
	<b>SOYBEAN</b>	Less water use	No nitrogen concerns (soybeans fix nitrogen)	Limited suppression of waterhemp <b>PRE herbicide</b>	Planter setup not critical for stand	Prevents green bridge, some beneficial natural enemies
<b>AT PLANTING</b>	<b>CORN</b>	Can help in wet years and hurt in dry years	Increased nitrogen tie up/allelopathy More nitrogen up front	More waterhemp suppression <b>PRE herbicide</b>	<b>Planter adjustments for increased biomass critical</b>	Grass on grass, green bridge, more beneficial natural enemies
	<b>SOYBEAN</b>	Can help in wet years and hurt in dry years	No nitrogen concerns (soybeans fix nitrogen)	More waterhemp suppression <b>PRE herbicide</b>	<b>Planter adjustments for increased biomass critical</b>	Green bridge but more residue to subdue white mold, more beneficial natural enemies
<b>DELAYED TERMINATION</b> (14 days after planting)	<b>CORN</b>	Accelerating water use, but more residue to retain water later	Significant nitrogen tie up <b>More nitrogen up front, but may not offset total tie up</b>	Most waterhemp suppression <b>PRE herbicide still recommended</b>	<b>Planter adjustments for increased biomass critical</b>	Increased seedling disease, green bridge, most beneficial natural enemies
	<b>SOYBEAN</b>	Delayed termination only hurt soybean yield in drought (e.g., 2023)	No nitrogen concerns (soybeans fix nitrogen)	Most waterhemp suppression <b>PRE herbicide still recommended</b>	<b>Planter adjustments for increased biomass critical</b>	Nearly 100% reduction in white mold when crimping, most beneficial natural enemies

## Contact Information

**Kim Meyer, Agronomist/Program Manager**

608-445-1474

meyer.kim@danecounty.gov

**Brooke Lerum, Resource Conservationist**

608-224-3750, ext. 8518

brooke.lerum@usda.gov

**Address:**

5201 Fen Oak Dr. Room 208

Madison, WI 53718

<https://demofarms.danecounty.gov/>

## Upcoming Events

**We know you're busy prepping for plant 2026. No events to share for now.**

Looking for a *quick* YouTube video on **planter set-up tips** for planting into extra residue or cover crops? Check out this 6 minute video from the UW:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zc42c6Ox4IE>



**Find us on Facebook and listen to the Dane Demo Farms Podcast - search for us online!**



USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender. Dane Demo Farms is funded by an agreement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.



Dane County Land & Water Resources Department  
5201 Fen Oak Drive, Room 208  
Madison, WI 53718



## About the Research

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At the Dane Demo Farm Network, our research is farmer-led and farmer-focused, which means we're working to answer the real, on-the-ground questions you have about adopting conservation practices. Each demo farm hosts its own projects, and we also run several exciting initiatives across the entire network.

We're excited to share data from the 2024 and 2025 growing seasons. Before we dive into the results, here's a quick overview of how these on-farm research projects were carried out.

All fieldwork in these plot areas is completed by the participating farmers or their service providers. They manage every step—planting, harvesting, tillage, pesticide applications, and manure and fertilizer applications. Dane Demo Farms staff surveyed and flagged the plot areas, provided plot maps showing each treatment, collected soil and plant tissue samples, and completed the data analysis.

Plot sizes vary depending on the farmer's equipment, typically ranging from 30-90 feet wide and 200-500 feet long. Please note: these plots are not replicated.

At harvest, farmers collected the yield data using calibrated yield monitors when available. In other cases, plot harvest was weighed using weigh wagons, portable scales, or on-farm scales. We also collected grain or forage samples and dried them at the UW-Arlington Research Station to measure moisture. Yields were then adjusted using the measured moisture values.

As you review the results, keep in mind they reflect only one to two years of data—and as we all know, no two growing seasons are ever the same. Use these findings to inform your thinking, but remember that 2026 may tell a different story. We hope you enjoy exploring the data.



# Methods

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Each project has its own set of protocols based on the project goals. We collected baseline data on all plots, including routine soil tests, soil nitrate tests, soil health tests, and more. We will use these data to track progress over the coming years.

## 2025 Projects

1. Cover crop termination timing
2. Slug and Insect Monitoring
3. Liming in a no-till system
4. Using cover crops to replace tillage on low-lying acres
5. Phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) availability from digested solids and composted digested solids
6. Transition to no-till (from chisel plowing)
7. Edge-of-field monitoring

↪ *More information on this project will be shared in the Summer 2026 Newsletter*

Before the termination of each cover crop, we collected multiple plant **biomass samples** within the plots, dried them, and sent them in to a lab for analysis - luckily we have UW-Arlington Ag Research Station close by to access their plant driers.

All soil **nitrogen samples** were taken at two depths, 0-12" and 12-24" - beginning in the fall with one set of samples and continuing into the spring starting in April and continuing up until mid-July. Ear-leaf samples were taken at tassel. We utilize a mix of commercial labs, as well as the UW Arriaga lab for sample analysis.

With the addition of insect monitoring on a few farms, **slug and beneficial insect traps** were checked and/or collected on a weekly basis for two months in the spring. Insects were preserved in an anti-freeze and water solution so they could be counted and identified. It took many months to sort through all of the insects.

All fields with insect monitoring, as well as any projects that included tillage, had both **moisture and temperature sensors** installed in early spring. Sensors stayed in the field until mid-June or into July, depending on the height of the crop.



# Summary of 2025 Research Data

## Cover Crop Termination Timing

A network-wide study on all participating farms focused on cover crop termination timing. The goal is to identify the best time to end a cover crop to support soil health while still maintaining strong yields.

Each farm set up at least four plot strips. This included:

- One strip with no cover crop (the comparison strip), and
- Three strips with a cover crop terminated at different times: the first spring opportunity, just before planting, and at planting.

Two farms also added additional treatments, including crimping at planting and termination after planting.

In 2024 and 2025, the participating farms planted different crops—some of the farms planted soybeans, others grew corn for grain, and one has planted continuous corn for silage. The yield chart to the right show how each treatment performed. The no cover crop treatment serves as the baseline and is shown as 100% of the target yield. All other treatments are reported relative to that baseline:

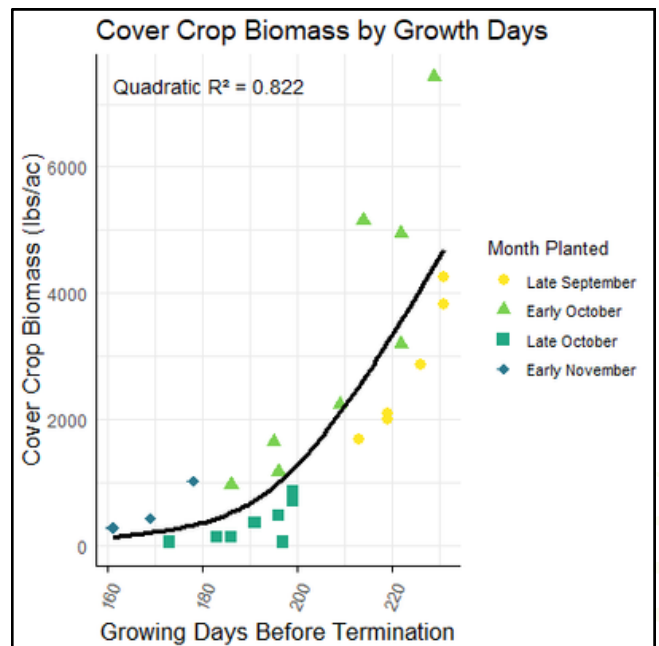
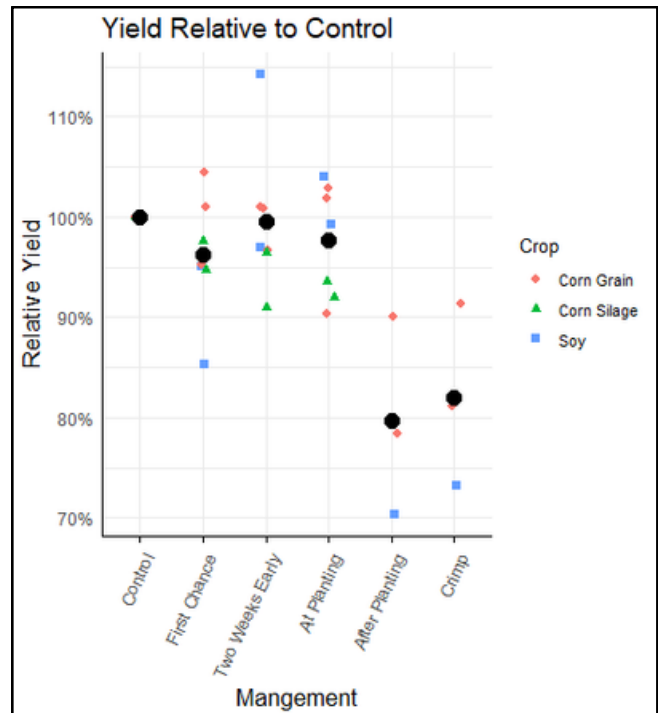
- Below 100% indicates a yield reduction compared to no cover crop, and
- Above 100% indicates a yield increase compared to no cover crop.

Please note that these results reflect just two years of data.

Cover crop biomass matters, too. If your goal is weed suppression, research from the UW Cropping Systems Weed Science program suggests you typically need close to 5,000 pounds of biomass per acre to achieve effective suppression—especially in soybeans.

In our study, treatments reached that threshold only if: cover crops that were established by early-October and kept growing until termination at planting. You can see this on the biomass chart to the right.

The chart also shows that cover crops planted in November produced very little biomass. If a farm is new to cover crops and concerned about the cover crops getting away from them in spring, later planting may be beneficial when first getting started with cover crops.



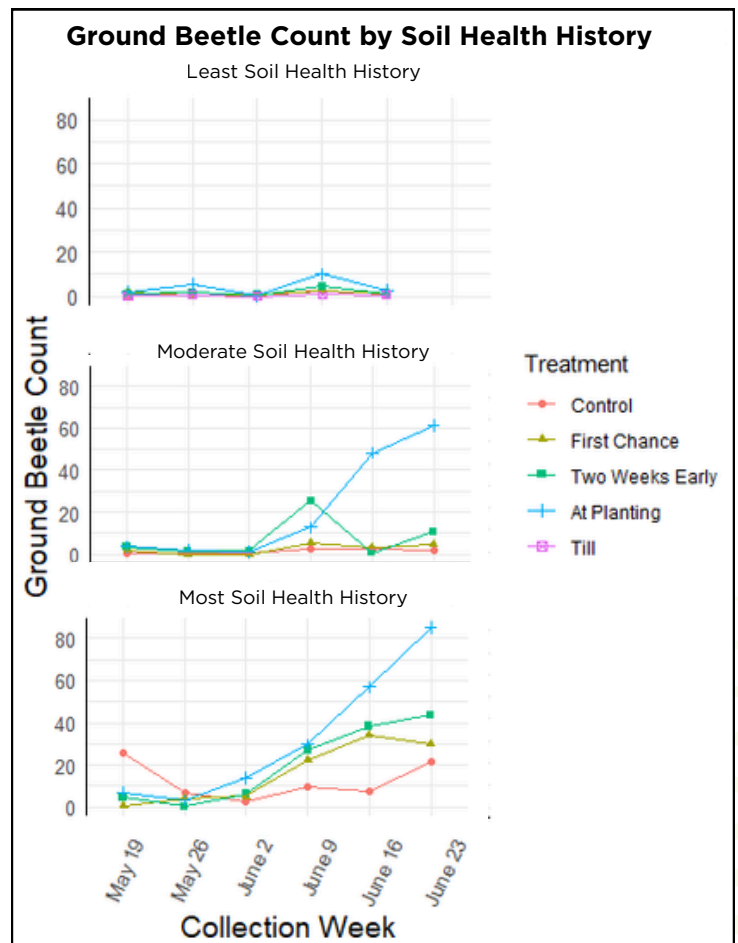
# Summary of 2025 Research Data

## Slug and Insect Study

This study tracks how early-season insect communities respond to different cover crop termination timings and soil health histories. Slugs can cause stand loss in cool, wet springs, and ground beetles—key beneficial predators that feed on slugs—play an important role in keeping that pressure in check. At each site, we monitor slug activity using shingle traps and ground beetle activity using pitfall traps, collecting both weekly through the early part of the growing season. We pair these data with stand counts and feeding damage ratings to understand how pest pressure and beneficial predator activity interact during crop establishment.

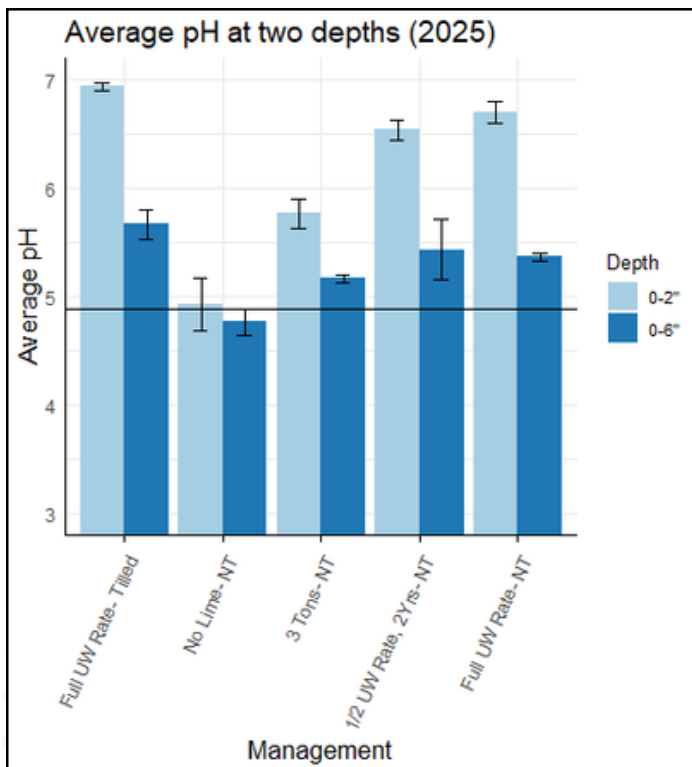
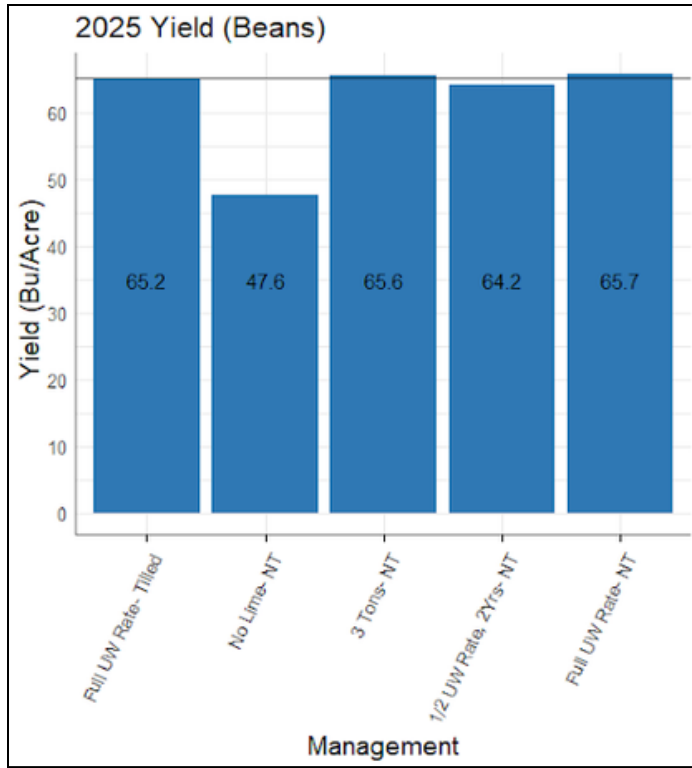
Across farms, we are beginning to see clear correlations between beneficial predator activity and soil health history. Fields with longer no-till histories or more consistent cover crop use tend to support higher ground beetle activity, suggesting that improved soil structure and residue cover create better habitat for these predators. At the same time, adding a cover crop—even when biomass is modest—appears to help moderate slug pressure by supporting a more active and diverse predator community.

Together, these patterns point toward an important ecological benefit of soil-building practices: healthier soils and more continuous living cover don't just influence water and nutrients—they also shape the biological community that protects young crops. As we continue collecting multi-year data, we expect to refine how termination timing, biomass, and soil health interact to influence both pests and beneficials.



# Summary of 2025 Research Data

## Liming Study



Farmers hosting this project are interested in whether cover crops can help move lime into the soil profile as effectively as tillage. Their question focused on whether the biological activity encouraged by cover crops—especially earthworms and microbial turnover—could provide enough natural mixing to replace the mechanical incorporation that tillage normally provides. All plots began with similarly low pH levels, giving a clean baseline for comparing how each approach changed soil conditions over time.

To compare these systems, we set up several management strips that differed in how much lime was applied and how it was incorporated. One strip served as the control and received no lime, no tillage, but received a cover crop. Another strip received 8 tons of lime and received a tillage pass with a vertical till implement. The remaining strips stayed in continuous no-till and received either 8 tons once, 4 tons applied two years in a row, or a single 3-ton application, and was planted with a cover crop.

After the first growing season (2024), we didn't see yield differences that lined up with pH changes. But by the 2025 season, a pattern emerged: the strip that didn't receive any lime had noticeably lower yields, while all the limed strips—no-till with cover crops or tilled—yielded about the same. That tells us that a no-till and cover crop system without a pass of tillage to incorporate the lime, did not reduce the effectiveness of the lime, and may help support the biological processes that move the lime downward.

Soil tests showed higher pH in the top 2 inches compared to the 0–6 inch depth in all limed plots. That means there was some stratification, but it happened in both the no-till and tilled treatments.

# Summary of 2025 Research Data

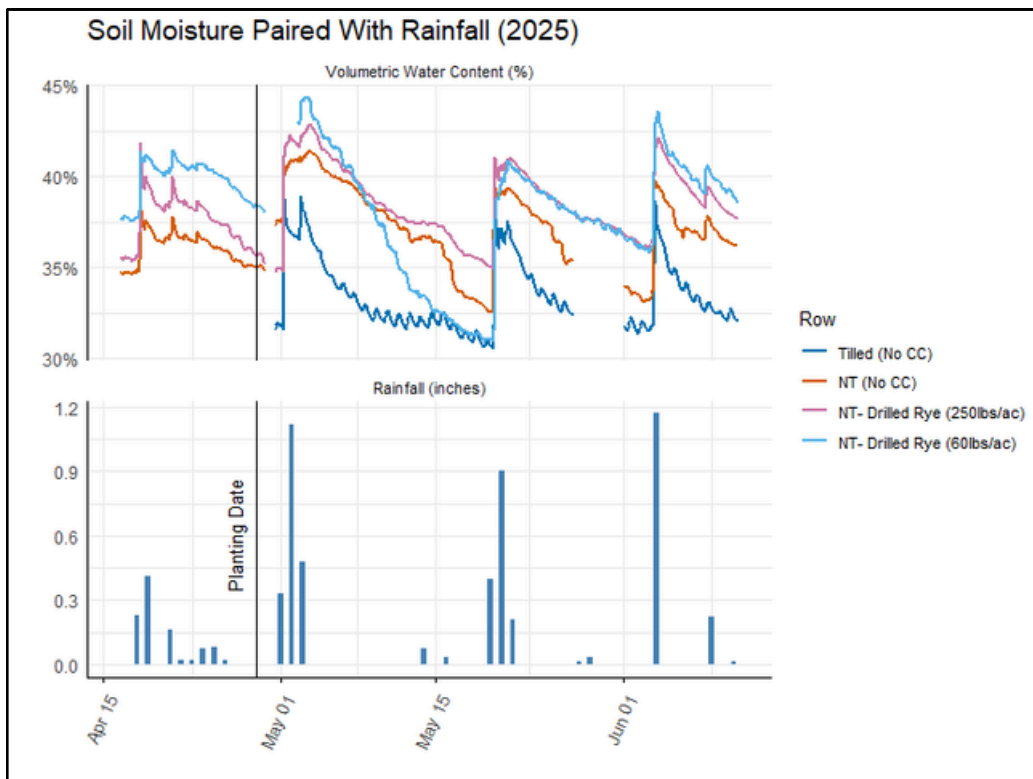
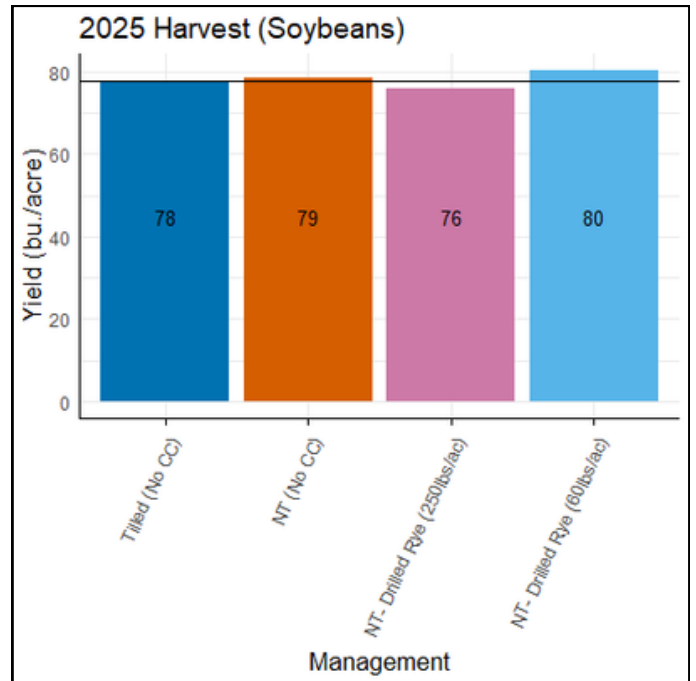
## Cover Crops in Low Lying Acres

In this study, the participating farmer wants to know if they can use cover crops in place of tillage to dry out their wet fields in the spring. We set up the study to have one tilled strip and three no-till strips, with or without cover crops. One important note is that the cover crop stand was fairly small this year—only a few inches tall at termination. The cover crops were planted on October 23, 2025 and the soybeans were planted on April 29, 2026.

Yields across all of the treatments were about the same. The spring was relatively dry, and we didn't run into the wet soil conditions that cover crops were intended to help manage.

When we look at soil moisture levels over the season, the tilled strip stood out. It consistently had lower soil moisture than the other treatments.

We'll need more data to fully understand why there was lower soil moisture in the tilled plot, but our current thinking is that it's related to the tillage history of the plot. Because the field has mostly been managed with minimal tillage, the no-till strips may have built better soil structure over time, helping them take in and hold water. In contrast, the spring tillage conducted in the tilled strip likely disrupted that structure, which may have reduced infiltration and led to drier soils (See additional observations on soil moisture and tillage in the 'no-till transition study' on page 7).



# Summary of 2025 Research Data

## Transition To No-Till: Year One

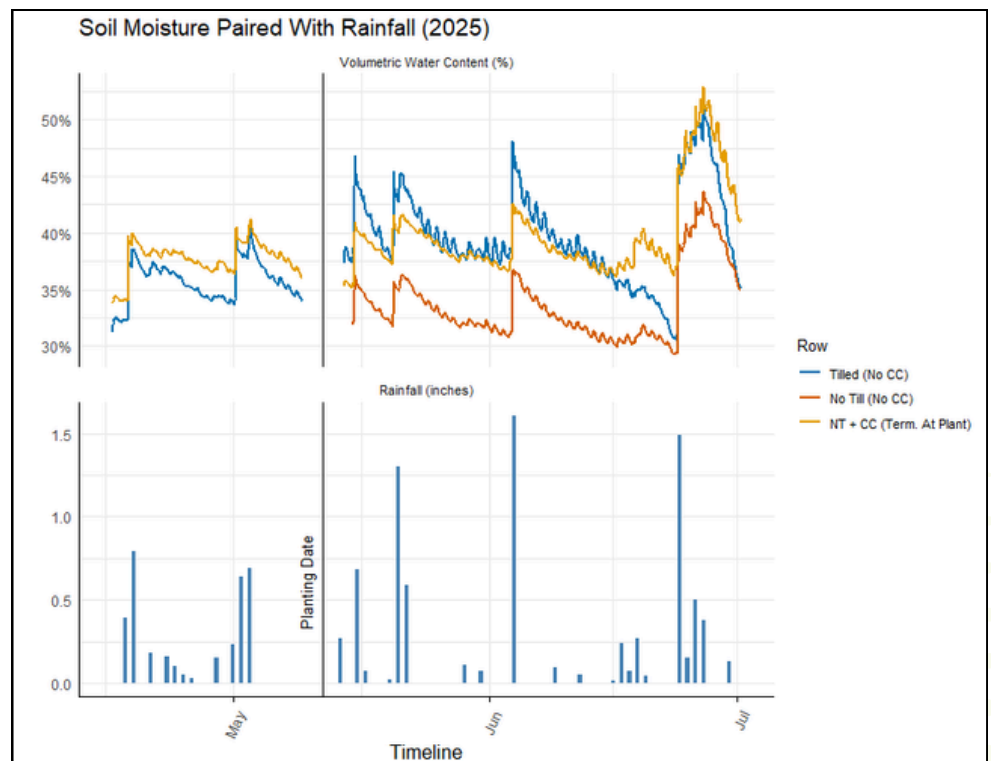
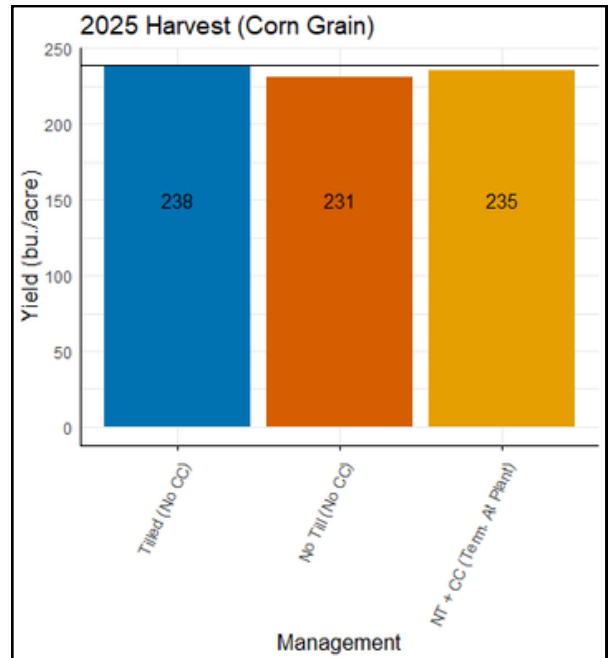
This study looked at what happens in the first year of transitioning to no-till. The field was set up with one tilled strip and four no-till strips. The no-till strips either had no cover crop or a rye cover crop terminated at different times: early spring, two weeks before planting, or at planting. Because this was corn-on-corn in the first year of transition, the cover crop was planted late October 2025 after grain harvest. As a result, cover crop growth was limited—only ankle to shin height by planting. Earlier termination timings were left out of the graphs for simplicity.

Yields were similar across treatments. We did not see the yield drop that is sometimes expected during the first year of transitioning to no-till.

Most of the differences showed up below ground. Looking at soil moisture over time, the no-till strip without a cover crop had lower soil moisture throughout the season compared to both the tilled strip and the no-till strip with a cover crop.

Interestingly, the tilled strip and the no-till cover crop strip performed similarly early in the season. But during a June rain event, the cover crop strip captured and held more water, while the tilled strip continued to dry.

This suggests that adding a cover crop may help ease the transition to no-till by improving soil structure and water-holding capacity—even in the first year, and even when the cover crop stand is modest due to late planting.



# Summary of 2025 Research Data

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## Edge of Field Monitoring

The Edge-of-Field Monitoring project is designed to measure how different management practices influence runoff leaving a field. At the paired sites—one site is managed with tillage and the other site is managed in no-till—automated monitoring stations were installed that capture runoff during rain events. These stations measure both the volume of water leaving the field and the nutrients carried with it, giving us a direct look at how soil management practices affect water movement and potential nutrient loss.

Because the two sites sit side-by-side and are part of the same crop field, they experience the same weather. This setup allows us to make a clean comparison between tillage and no-till systems. Over time, the data will help us understand how soil structure, residue cover, and infiltration influence runoff, and how conservation practices can reduce nutrient loss while protecting water quality.

The equipment installation was completed in July 2025, and as of mid-March 2026, no runoff has been collected. Melts have been slow and the soils have not been frozen solid - allowing for infiltration, even during the winter.

## Plans for 2026

In 2026, the Dane Demo Farm Network will continue building on the momentum from the past two seasons. All five participating farms will again take part in the network-wide Cover Crop Termination Timing study, giving us another year of data to understand how timing affects biomass, soil health, and yield across different cropping systems.

Several of our long-term studies will continue into their next phases, including:

- Liming in a No-Till System — tracking how lime moves through the soil profile over time and how cover crops influence that process.
- Transition to No-Till — following soil moisture, structure, and yield as fields move through the early years of no-till.
- Cover Crops on Low-Lying Acres — continuing to evaluate how cover crops and tillage affect soil moisture and trafficability in wetter parts of fields.

Alongside the research, we plan to expand our outreach efforts. We expect to host field days throughout the growing season and are already planning our 2026 winter meetings, where farmers, advisors, and partners can come together to review results and share ideas at locations across the county.

## Participating Farms

Endres Berryridge Farm, Waunakee  
Prosser Farms, Columbus  
Tyler Duerst Farm, Verona/Darlington  
Ripp-Vale Farms, Black Earth  
Sime Farm, Stoughton

## 2025 Research Team and Research Collaborators

Dr. Francisco Arriaga, UW	Izze McNamee, UW
Dr. Dane Elmquist, UW	Kim Meyer, Dane County LWRD
Brooke Lerum, NRCS	Will Fulwider, UW
Connor Schoelzel, UW	

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