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Farmers growing profits and soil health with winter camelina

By Stan Wise

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PIERRE, SD – By now, most people working in agriculture have heard that growing a cover crop after a cash crop is harvested can make a big difference in soil health. Healthy soil pays off in a number of ways, including reduced input costs and increased operational resilience, but farmers have to get creative if they want their cover crops to make direct contributions to the bottom line.

A new program in South Dakota can help producers do just that by turning their cover crop into another cash crop.

Camelina is a crop that produces an oilseed which can be used to create biofuel, and the winter variety of camelina can be planted in the fall and harvested the following summer. That offers some interesting opportunities for farmers.

For instance, in a practice called relay cropping, producers can plant soybeans (or other crops) into the growing camelina in the spring. The camelina is harvested in late June or early July, and then soybeans can be harvested from the same field in the fall. This system allows producers to get two cash crops off the same land in the same year while reaping the soil health benefits of having continuous roots in the soil for a longer portion of the year.

The challenge for producers in South Dakota, at least, is finding a nearby market for the camelina, which is not accepted at most grain elevators in the state.

On-farm pickup

This is where Cargill's SourcePoint Commodities Winter Camelina Program might come in handy.

"Our contract offering includes a number of different things for growers to make decisions on, starting with delivery or pickup on-farm," Cargill Novel Oilseeds Program Manager Anna Teeter said, noting that the goal is to give growers flexibility as they decide whether camelina fits their system.

That on-farm pickup isn't the only benefit of Cargill's program.

"We are also pricing the contract off of soybean futures with an additional premium," Teeter said. "And this allows growers to actually price when the market moves rather than a flat rate price, which a lot of growers have been quite happy with."

The program also offers a minimum revenue guarantee for participants designed to help growers manage risk while they build experience with a new crop.

"For growers that take the crop to harvest, you will have a minimum revenue that you can earn per acre," Teeter said. "It's acting kind of like a crop insurance or a risk program so that growers feel they have some backing for trying something new while they get yield history for federal crop insurance."

While relay cropping camelina with soybeans results in diminished soybean yields, the addition of the camelina within the same year can see an increase in total revenue.

"On average, our better growers are seeing 25, 26, maybe even 27 bushels an acre (of camelina). And with the relay concept they're seeing that with a maybe 10-percent reduction in their soybean yield," Teeter said. "If you have an average of 50 bushels soybean yield and you lose 10 percent, that's five bushels. Okay, well, you're losing five bushels, but you're gaining 25, right? And so that's where the math for growers really can start to make sense in a way that helps us diversify the rotation, include soil health practices, and still have an economic opportunity for farmers."

Other benefits

Winter camelina is more than just an additional revenue stream.

U.S. Department of Agriculture – Agricultural Research Service Research Agronomist Carrie Eberle said that studies have demonstrated camelina's soil health benefits.

"What we have found with winter camelina in our studies is that it really offers the same benefits that a cover crop does," Eberle said. "Winter camelina is going to be planted in mid-September and is going to be harvested in early July. And from that mid-September till around the end of April, its job is basically to be a cover crop."

Eberle's research in Morris, Minnesota, includes a focus on agroecology. She said studies have shown that camelina decreases soil erosion, improves soil structure, scavenges excess nitrogen, and provides food for pollinators. It can also be paired with crops other than soybeans, including millet, dry beans, and sunflowers, allowing for a more diverse crop rotation.

Camelina can also play a role in weed control.

"When you have a good stand of winter camelina, it seems to be very effective at suppressing those early spring weeds," Eberle said. There is also an option to control weeds in the soybeans with the same chemical application that is used to desiccate the camelina prior to its harvest.

Learning curve

Producers growing winter camelina for the first time shouldn't expect everything to go perfectly in the first year, Eberle said.

“The first thing I tell any producer that's trying something new is there's going to be a learning curve. You know, it's not corn and soybeans. You haven't been growing it for 30 years. So, you need some patience,” Eberle said, “and don't throw the baby out with the bathwater if some things go awry.”

Producer David Kruger grew camelina for the first time last year on his farm near Twin Brooks, SD, and he experienced a few challenges.

“So last year, I planted 80 acres of it, and it was so dry when we planted it that it never started. It was laying in dry dirt,” Kruger said.

Then his farm received a couple of inches of rain in mid-December, and some of the camelina began growing. “Then some of it came up in the spring, some of it didn't. It was a really thin stand. It was like maybe a third of a stand. So, we took out pretty much all of it,” Kruger said.

However, he kept eight acres so that he could get the experience of harvesting it. That was valuable experience, as it gave him a chance to learn what changes needed to be made to his combine to harvest such a small seed. Kruger was also late getting it harvested, and his soybeans had grown tall enough to be damaged by the combine.

This year, Kruger knew he wanted to make some changes from the very beginning. He plugged the row on his drill every 30 inches when he set it up to plant to plant the camelina.

“So, we've got a skip row of camelina every 30 inches, and then we plan to plant beans in that 30-inch spacing in that row that we skipped,” he said. “And then my hope is that we harvest it 20 days earlier (than last year) where the beans will still be shorter, and if they're not, I figured I'll just put a piece of drain tile over the cutter bar where the row is so it pushes it over instead of cutting it off.”

Eberle recommended checking equipment before harvest. “It is so small seeded that it basically flows like sand. So, any small cracks or crevices that it can flow out of in your, grain cart or your combine need to be sealed up. But we all know duct tape is everyone's best friend,” Eberle said.

Other modifications will need to be made to the combine to make sure the seed is properly cleaned and shatter loss is minimized.

Despite the learning curve that comes with growing a new crop for the first time, camelina has the potential to be a tool growers can use to make soil health practices more affordable.

“I'm really, really excited for the crop to be available in South Dakota because it's an intermediate oilseed that allows growers to take advantage of winter months when we're not growing a lot of other things, giving South Dakota farmers another option they can evaluate based on what works best for their operation,” Teeter said.

To learn more about the benefits of diverse crop rotations and improved soil health, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org or contact the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition at sdsoilhealth@gmail.com or 605-280-4190.



USDA-ARS photo

Winter camelina in bloom.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/4kPnWnI>



USDA-ARS photo

Winter camelina provides excellent forage for pollinators.

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USDA-ARS photo

The winter camelina in this field trial is drying down prior to harvest.

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Photo provided by Anna Teeter at Cargill

Soybeans can be relay cropped with winter camelina so that both can be harvested in the same year.

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Photo provided by Anna Teeter at Cargill

Camelina produces a very small seed which necessitates some combine modifications to ensure an efficient harvest.

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