

Cover crops following combinable crops

Funding is offered for establishment of a fast-growing cover crop that reduces nutrient runoff and leaching from land that would normally be left bare or down to stubbles during winter. It will reduce surface runoff and the risk of potential pollutants, such as sediment, pesticides and nutrients, being leached to groundwater or carried to nearby watercourses. Cover crops also improve soil health and increase water infiltration. Forage crops grown for grazing (such as stubble turnips or kale) and cash crops grown to be harvested (such as oilseed rape or lucerne) are **not** eligible. Cover crops funded by any other scheme (such as Countryside Stewardship) or future schemes such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive (e.g. the intermediate level of the SFI Arable & Horticultural Soils Standard) are **not** eligible.

Length of agreement available

August / September 2023 until 31st March 2024.

Where to use this measure

Only on cultivated land where the crop grown prior to the cover crop was a combinable crop (either spring or winter sown).

Where this measure cannot be used

Cover crops cannot be funded in situations where the management of the field is in breach of the Farming Rules for Water or Nitrate Vulnerable Zone rules (if applicable). Successful applicants are required to sign the compliance declaration described in the record keeping section below.

Requirements

- Sow a fast-growing and dense cover crop by *15th September* to provide dense ground cover and protect the land from overwinter soil erosion and nutrient runoff / leaching.
- Retain the cover crop until at least *15th January* if the following crop is combinable and until at least *1st March* if the following crop is maize. Once destroyed, aim to establish the following spring crop within 6 weeks.
- Grass may be used as a cover crop but only where it will be kept no longer than *31st May* in the year after establishment.
- Estimates of the nutrients released by the cover crop should be used in nutrient planning for the following crop to ensure there is no over application or excess availability of nutrients, which may subsequently leach or runoff.

Choice of cover crop

- A mix or a single species may be used, but crops should be suitable for autumn sowing, fast growing and mainly frost tolerant to provide adequate ground cover overwinter

- Brassicas such as oil radish and mustard may be used as the main species. If sown as a single species:
 - The minimum seed rate of oil radish should be 10kg/ha if August sown and 15kg/ha if September sown.
 - Mustard should be sown at 7.5kg/ha if drilled and 10kg/ha if broadcast.
- Cereals such as oats and rye may be used as the main species. The minimum seed rate should be 80kg/ha if cereals are used as the main or only cover crop species.
- Other species such as clover, vetch, phacelia, linseed, sunflowers and buckwheat may also be included in the mix. The seed rate of a mix of cover crop species should be sufficient to provide dense ground cover within a few weeks of establishment.

How to establish the cover crop

- Remove any areas of soil compaction, but do not subsoil over archaeological features.
- Sow the cover crop within 2 weeks of harvesting and no later than *15th September*.
- Establish either by (i) direct drilling or (ii) cultivating and then drilling or broadcasting.
- Sow at a suitable seed rate to provide a dense groundcover and to prevent soil erosion (see seed rates above).

Buffer strip requirement

- For fields next to a watercourse (or next to a road, track or flow pathway leading directly to a watercourse), applications for cover crop funding will be scored more favourably if a buffer strip against the watercourse is already established, or if a buffer strip is planned to be established by the time the cover crop is sown. Where buffer strips do not currently exist, establishment and retention of new buffers to accompany cover crops may be eligible for funding through the scheme.

Do not:

- **Do not** graze the cover crop without the prior agreement of a Wessex Water catchment advisor.
- **Do not** apply any organic manures or artificial fertiliser to the cover crop, or prior to its establishment. No organic manures for the following spring crop should be applied before 14th February.
- **Do not** establish the following crop without calculating the nutrient content of soil, any manures applied and the available nutrients from the cover crop residue. Apply no more nutrients than the crop requires.

Record keeping and payment terms

Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them with *the payment claim*. Payment will only be made upon satisfactory receipt of all of the following records:

- Photographs of each cover cropped field taken on any day in *December 2023*.
- Soil analysis results (pH, P and K as a minimum) for the relevant fields dated within the past 3 years.
- Farm and field information needed to run a phosphorus loss tool for the farm and calculate the reduction in phosphorus loss to water arising from this work. This will include farm data relating to livestock numbers, cropping areas and fertiliser / manure inputs.

- Self-declaration that the terms of the project agreement have been adhered to (*key terms are listed above*).
- Successful applicants are required to sign a declaration confirming that:
 - reasonable precautions are taken to prevent nutrients and soil from the relevant field entering watercourses or from being leached to groundwater - to an extent that could cause pollution.
 - the relevant fields have not been (i) the source of a recorded pollution incident which could have been prevented by the farmer taking reasonable precautions to prevent that pollution and/or (ii) the subject of a warning, fine, prosecution or BPS deduction issued to the farmer by the Environment Agency or RPA for a breach of NVZ rules or Farming Rules for Water in the past 5 years.
- It is expected that to support and inform the above declaration, successful applicants will complete the Environment Agency's Agricultural Compliance Tool (ACT) by 31st December in each year of the agreement and submit it when completed to Wessex Water (who will hold it in confidence) and address any actions identified by the ACT. For agreements involving annual payments of more than 5 years duration and/or with a value in excess of £5,000 of annual payments, this is a requirement.
- Agreement holders are required to complete a Wessex Water supplier application form in order to receive their first payment. A copy of this is available on the scheme website.
- Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them *on request*:
 - Field operations at the field parcel level, including associated invoices



Mustard cover crop established immediately after harvest of winter wheat