



First Green of Spring

WATKINS GLEN, March 6, 2014 - After an arduous winter, the arrival of spring is especially anticipated this year. One of the more vivid signs of this solstice is the bright green from the early growth of winter grains such as wheat and barley and from fields planted with cover crops. Cover crops are crops grown solely to provide soil cover and for improving soil health. They are also called green manures.

Farmers try to plant cover crops in the fall on as many fields as possible. Winter rye (also called cereal rye) is often used and is plowed down before it gets too tall in the spring but many other crops can also be used including clover and special types of radishes. They build and maintain active and stable organic matter for the soil, improving soil tilth - the physical condition of the soil, and they alleviate soil compaction.

Cover crops reduce erosion because the soil can absorb more water and the plants absorb the impact of rain. The growing plants recycle nutrients such as nitrogen – the roots take them from the soil in the fall and they are resupplied for the next crop when the cover crop is plowed down in the spring.

Cover crops can also help with weed suppression and break the cycle of problematic insects and diseases. They supply food and habitat for wildlife and beneficial insects.

Cover crops are just one of many Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) practices being used by all types of farmers, including dairy and other livestock, field crops, vegetable, grape and other fruit growers. “Farmers know that in order for their businesses to remain strong, they need to be vigilant about protecting the environment. There are over 200 farmers that participate in the AEM program in Schuyler County. It is a voluntary program that assists farmers in their environmental stewardship efforts and the District has helped many farms with cost-share assistance for cover crops and many other

practices,” said Jerry Verrigni, District Manager of the Schuyler County Soil and Water Conservation District.

“This winter has been hard on everyone, including our farmers who are out in the cold much of the day, but new growth from crops that made it through the winter will soon be visible and reminds us of how tough we really are, and the importance of our farming heritage,” Jerry added. For more information on the Conservation District and the AEM program, visit their website, www.schuylerswcd.com

Caption for photo: Winter/cereal rye cover crop growing in early spring.