



**COVER
CROP
CHAMPIONS™**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Cover Crop Champion grant awarded to Mower SWCD

Local farmers Cotter, Finnegan giving presentations through fall

AUSTIN, Minn. – Thursday, March 9, 2017 – Cover cropping in southeast Minnesota will increase greatly in awareness this year thanks to a national grant awarded to Mower Soil & Water Conservation District for work with two local farmers.

National Wildlife Federation recently awarded a \$8,740 grant to Mower SWCD naming the office as a Cover Crop Champion for outreach along with Tom Cotter and Tom Finnegan as Cover Crop Champion farmers. Cotter and Finnegan incorporate cover crops into their farm operations, both located just outside of Austin. Cover cropping involves the planting of a second, unharvested crop in coordination with regular cash crops, such as corn and soybeans.

Steve Lawler, Mower SWCD's resource specialist, applied for the NWF grant and will work closely with Cotter and Finnegan on Cover Crop Champion activities. He has worked with both through the Mower Soil Health Team formed in early 2016.

"They really are ideal farmers for this because they're passionate about cover crops and what that practice can do to help a farm in numerous ways while also benefiting the environment and wildlife," Lawler said.

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program says cover crops offer economic and ecological benefits:

- Reducing fertilizer costs.
- Improving crop yields by enhancing soil health.
- Reducing the need for herbicides and pesticides.
- Preventing soil erosion.
- Conserving soil moisture.
- Protecting water quality.
- Helping to safeguard personal health.

Since 2013, NWF has provided support to 42 Cover Crop Champion teams in giving information and farming knowledge on cover crops to local farmers and crop advisors. The program runs mostly in the Upper Mississippi River Basin states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

Champion farmers generally give presentations in the region on cover crops and soil health to farmers and others. Outreach champions are ag professionals employed by a farm-related organization who support the farmer champion.

Cotter, a fourth-generation farmer, raises corn, soybeans, peas, sweet corn and alfalfa as well as runs a cow/calf beef operation on his Austin Township farm. In 2016, Cotter and his father, Michael, were Mower SWCD's Outstanding Conservationists of the Year and were certified through the state's Ag Certainty water-quality program.

With cover crops, Cotter has increased his farm's grain quality; reduced chemical and fertilizer inputs; increased water infiltration; and greatly reduced erosion.

"It's not too late to do our part in saving our environment one acre at a time," Cotter said. "We need to think about the changes we implement now to secure the land and wildlife for our future generations."

To succeed in cover cropping, Cotter said networking with farmers is vital. "Cover cropping is a journey I've been on for many years," he said. "I had felt alone until I joined the soil health teams and realized there are other like-minded farmers out there."

Finnegan is one of those farmers Cotter connected with through cover-crop networking. A third-generation livestock producer in Red Rock Township, Finnegan is a full-time electrician who runs a cow/calf beef operation while also starting in recent years to grow corn and soybeans. In 2007, he and his father, George, were Mower SWCD's Outstanding Conservationists of the Year.

Finnegan used to rent his land to crop farmers until he started noticing undesirable changes on the ground. Finnegan chose to start farming his land with a minimum-tillage approach and now covers all his farmed land with various cover crop species that help his beef enterprise and goals for conservation and wildlife, which is a high priority to him as an avid outdoorsman.

"In just a few years, we are seeing a significant change," Finnegan said of his land near the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center along Dobbins Creek's north branch. "Good things are coming for us in agricultural conservation, and cover crops will be a driving part."

Those interested in the Cover Crop Champion program or having Mower County's Cover Crop Champion team speak at an event, contact Mower SWCD at 507-434-2603 or go online to: www.mowerswcd.org/CoverCropChampion2017.html.

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

Since 1953, Mower SWCD has provided land and conservation services to Mower County landowners to help manage lands in a way that promotes a sound economy as well as sustains and enhances natural resources that are key to the state's environmental health. Mower SWCD is one of Minnesota's 91 SWCDs each are governed by an elected board.

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Cotter



Finnegan

Cover Crop Champions – Mower County

Who: Mower SWCD and farmers Tom Cotter and Tom Finnegan.
What: Cover Crop Champion grant from National Wildlife Federation.
Where: Mostly in Mower County and southeast MN.
When: Grant goes through September 2017.
Why: Raise cover-crop awareness for farmers and others.
Online: www.mowerswcd.org/CoverCropChampion2017.html
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