

# DIRECT SEED LINK

2013 CRP take-out into canola, J.E.A. Farms

## The Take on CRP Take-Out

Three growers share their experience with CRP take-out this year

**John Aeschliman, J.E.A. Farms, Colfax WA**

This was Cory and my second experience with CRP take-out, and I made several choices based on research and calculated risks. I started the process last fall, mowing the 850 acres in CRP to get the grass and weeds to a manageable level. In the spring, I opted for an early take-out, forgoing part of the final CRP payment so I could get a jump on the crop year. I applied Round Up May 10, at a rate of two quarts/ac, and then left the land fallow over the summer to try to capture as much additional moisture as I could before seeding.

I opted to take-out about 130 acres into Round Up ready winter canola, which required special approval since there were no approved provisions for CRP take-out into winter canola. I chose canola for a number of reasons, including the benefit of having a Round Up ready version to help with weed control, and the tap root to promote nutrient cycling, along with the other many benefits that a canola crop brings to the table. This is a crop I've tried under several different management strategies over the years, and I wanted to see if taking advantage of the soil moisture content coming out of CRP could help give it the boost it needed for a high yield next year. It doesn't hurt either that the price of canola has gone up since I first tried it about 10 years ago.

I was hoping to plant between July 25- August 25, which was suggested by Dr. Frank Young and some others who know, as the best window to get an established crop that will overwinter successfully, but Mother Nature didn't cooperate. The land is located in the 12-14" rainfall area and in July the moisture had dropped to the 3-4" level. By mid-August we still didn't have the moisture levels I wanted to see, but I took a chance toward the end of the month and planted the winter canola just in the north-slope soils at 1" instead of the recommended ½" in at a rate of 3-4 lb/ac. I applied 130# liquid Urea, 20# S, 20# K, 15# P, Boron and Calcium Chloride at seeding time. That planting came up, but I waited until early September to plant the rest of the canola crop, after light rains early in the month brought the soil moisture level closer to the surface. The seeds went in in time to benefit from late September soaking rains and the sunny October that followed. Those plants are now 4" tall and at a good, sturdy rosette stage. The stand is thick and looks to be in good shape going into winter. The September seeding, although 2-3 weeks after the August planting, overtook the earlier North Side planting because of

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Winter 2014  
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*To provide Pacific Northwest farmers with information exchange, advocacy on conservation policy issues and research coordination that will assure adoption of economically viable and environmentally sustainable direct seed cropping systems.*

## **CRP Take-out** *continued*

the larger number of heat units on the southern exposure, and to date is still somewhat ahead of the North side plantings.

The right equipment is critical for CRP take-out. I purchased a 30' Flexi-Coil air drill and Tank Cart with late model Cross Slot openers, 2 years ago. We modified it by installing tanks for liquid N, S, and P and put hydraulic down pressure on the wings. The openers were designed by Dr. Baker in New Zealand to plant directly into sod, since grass is a normal part of their rotation. I can't imagine another piece of equipment working as well. This is critical when seeding into CRP because the top 2-3" is heavy residue or sod. Canola needs to be  $\frac{1}{2}$ -1" into the soil, below that sod layer which is accomplished with ease with this drill. It's been our experience in the past that by harvest next year the sod layer should be mostly broken down from biological activity, and after the second crop year the crowns and roots are basically history.

I plan to follow the canola crop with winter wheat next year. An additional 270 acres of this CRP was planted in October to Clear First White WW and Clear First HRW with the balance of the 450 acreage is being planted to spring crops.

Most of this CRP ground has been out of production 10 years or more. I know the industry standard is still to plow it, but I believe that is a travesty, a waste of all the years of soil-building benefits, especially in this fragile soil, low rainfall area next to the Snake River.

**PNDSA Note:** John was one of the growers featured in "Symphony of the Soil," an award-winning documentary film released earlier this year which explores the creation, complexity and importance of soil. It was filmed around the world and features leading scientists, growers and conservationists. John recommends it as a good educational tool for classrooms, grower meetings, etc. Learn more at [www.symphonyofthesoil.com](http://www.symphonyofthesoil.com).

### **Jon Olson, Double J Farms, Garfield, WA**

I've done custom seeding and CRP take-out for three years, and so far this year I've taken 600 acres out of CRP on farms from Othello to Rock Lake, and closer to home in Garfield. Based on the owner's preferences, I've seeded those acres in a variety of crops: canola, winter wheat, triticale, barley and large garbanzo beans. While it's too early to tell for crops seeded this fall, so far growers are telling me that the crops are doing well. I'm in the process of gathering specific data from last year's crops to see what has worked best.

I own a CrossSlot drill, built by AgPro in Lewiston with openers from Baker No-Tillage, LTD of New Zealand. The CrossSlot opener is a good choice for CRP take-out because it is a true, direct seed one-pass drill that gives the least soil disturbance of any equipment I've tested. There are other types of equipment that could be used to plant into CRP ground – a hoe drill, yielder drill or Palouse Zero drill for example. The CrossSlot does the best job of seed placement, which I've found is critical since CRP take-out has been some of the most challenging seeding due to the uneven ground, ditches, and areas that are either really hard or soft.

When I have seeded into CRP, I work closely with my customers to make sure I'm implementing their strategies and meeting their goals. I do have suggestions based on my experience. The first priority for anyone going into a CRP take-out is to make sure the field is dead. Any green at all can result in weed control problems down the road. There are a number of weed control options, but I've found an application of RoundUp early and before planting an effective method. I recommend farmers work with their fertilizer company,

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## CRP Take-out *continued*

and have soil tests done to make sure they apply the necessary nutrients. I wouldn't recommend seeding CRP take-out into winter wheat unless the grower has a sound weed and nutrient management plan. Weed management has the potential to be an ongoing problem because of the high percentage of wild grasses in a



Jon Olson:  
CRP take-out with triticale

typical CRP field. To avoid the potential risk of an on-going weed control challenge, I usually recommend taking out CRP into a non-grassy crop.

As far as timing goes, I have seen growers seed CRP directly into a crop and others that postponed planting as long as the following year. It's understandable that most growers don't want to lose the time and income by allowing the field to sit idle for a year.

Looking at cost, I have not charged more for CRP take-out than any of my other custom seeding jobs. But I would caution a grower doing it himself to be prepared for surprises that can slow the process. If a field has been left alone for 10 years, it's likely the people working the ground will be new to the field. Even if it's the same operator, the field itself is going to have changed – be prepared for the field to be rough with coyote dens, badger holes, and in some cases ditches that formed in the CRP.

One of the best recommendations I can make for growers to talk with others who've been through the process. See what mistakes they made, what they'd do differently, and use that information to develop your CRP take-out strategy.

**PNDISA NOTE:** Watch for Jon's break out discussion group during the PNDISA Direct Seed Conference in January, where he'll present the detailed results of the different crop choices and CRP take-out strategies that he's seen to date.

### Eric Maier, Maier Farms, Ritzville, WA

I use conventional tillage on much of the land I farm, both my own grown and rented, but the Ritzville sandy loam soil prevalent around this region is sensitive. The high sand content makes it susceptible to wind erosion even after 10-15 years in CRP. With that in mind, I

wanted to disturb it as little as possible during the transition back into production, which made this a good opportunity to try direct seeding for the first time.

I started CRP take-out on 912 acres this past spring with a chem fallow, using 1qt to ½ gallon of RoundUp per acre to kill the vegetative growth. I followed with spot control of rabbitbrush and sagebrush with 2,4-D Acid. Right before seeding was planned, a thunderstorm provided enough moisture for a cheat grass bloom, which required a 14 oz/ac aerial application of glyphosate.

One of the recommendations I'd share with other growers is to conduct careful soil tests. I was surprised by how much nitrogen was being held in the soil. After taking into account the test results, I included 7 lbs starter fertilizer and 40 lbs of Thio-Sul when I seeded Clearfield wheat varieties 102-103 mixed, with a 10" spacing at seeding rate of 1bu/ac. I know that Clearfield wheat varieties are more expensive, and I chose higher seeding rates with the hope that I will be able to avoid the cost of applying Beyond next spring.

It wasn't just an issue of erosion control. Making the transition from CRP to production with direct seeding also made good financial sense. I was able to leverage EQIP funds and 319 funds through the Department of Ecology to cover the costs of renting the Spokane Conservation District's CrossSlot drill. The CrossSlot's serrated disc cut through the rabbitbrush and sagebrush in one pass. I am convinced no other drill could have handled the vegetation at that stage of growth. Now that it's been taken out, a hoe drill might be enough to handle any remaining woody residue in a few years. But for now my plan is to continue to rent the CrossSlot.

Looking at the field, I think it's off to a good start. I'm a conventional farmer, and this strategy may not work on other pieces of the land I farm. But depending on how this experiment goes, I may look at alternative conservation practices more seriously. It's worth noting that, as the cost of conventional farming are continuing to rise, several of my landlords are also keeping a close eye on this experiment with direct seeding.

But I think the pressure to move to direct seeding, or more conservation oriented agriculture, will come not only from the marketplace, but from government programs. I see a shift occurring in support programs shift from a focus on production to emphasis on the environment and sustainability, and I expect to see more funding opportunities available from the EPA, through programs like the Clean Water Act Section 319 funds related to control of non-point source pollution that will pass through the Washington Dept of Ecology and on to the Conservation districts. It's something all growers should be thinking about.

**PNDISA NOTE:** Read more about Maier's trial with direct seed in the November 2013 edition of *Wheat Life*.

*Compiled by Jennifer Wallace, Editor, Direct Seed Link*