

# The Superheroes of the Soil

Cover crops prevent erosion and increase infiltration



# Objectives

- **Understand** how cover crops can increase water infiltration
- **Explore the science** behind why cover crops are well known for their ability to prevent soil erosion
- **Hear what farmers say** about these topics and identify the management strategies that work for them



Photo by Edwin Remsberg

# Defining the Challenge



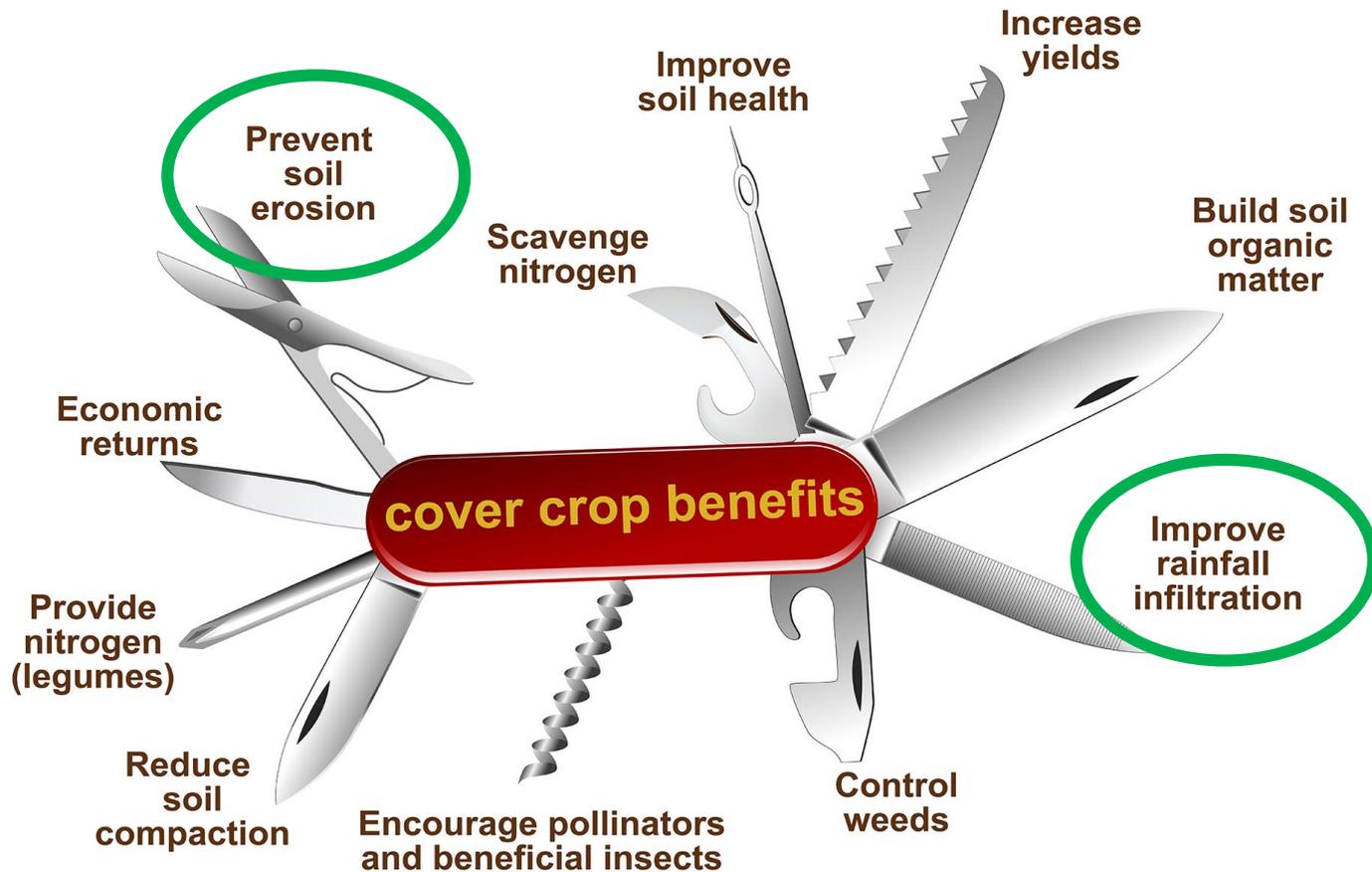
# Exploring a Solution

Cover crops are tools to keep the soil in place and improve water quality.



Photo by Edwin Remsberg

# Why plant cover crops?



What does the science say?



# What are cover crop impacts on soil loss and water infiltration?

- Literature review & synthesis of 35 scientific sources
- 20 species of cover crops represented





## Impact on infiltration?

Median increase in infiltration with cover crops: 92%

Mean increase: 134%

# What about cash crop residue?

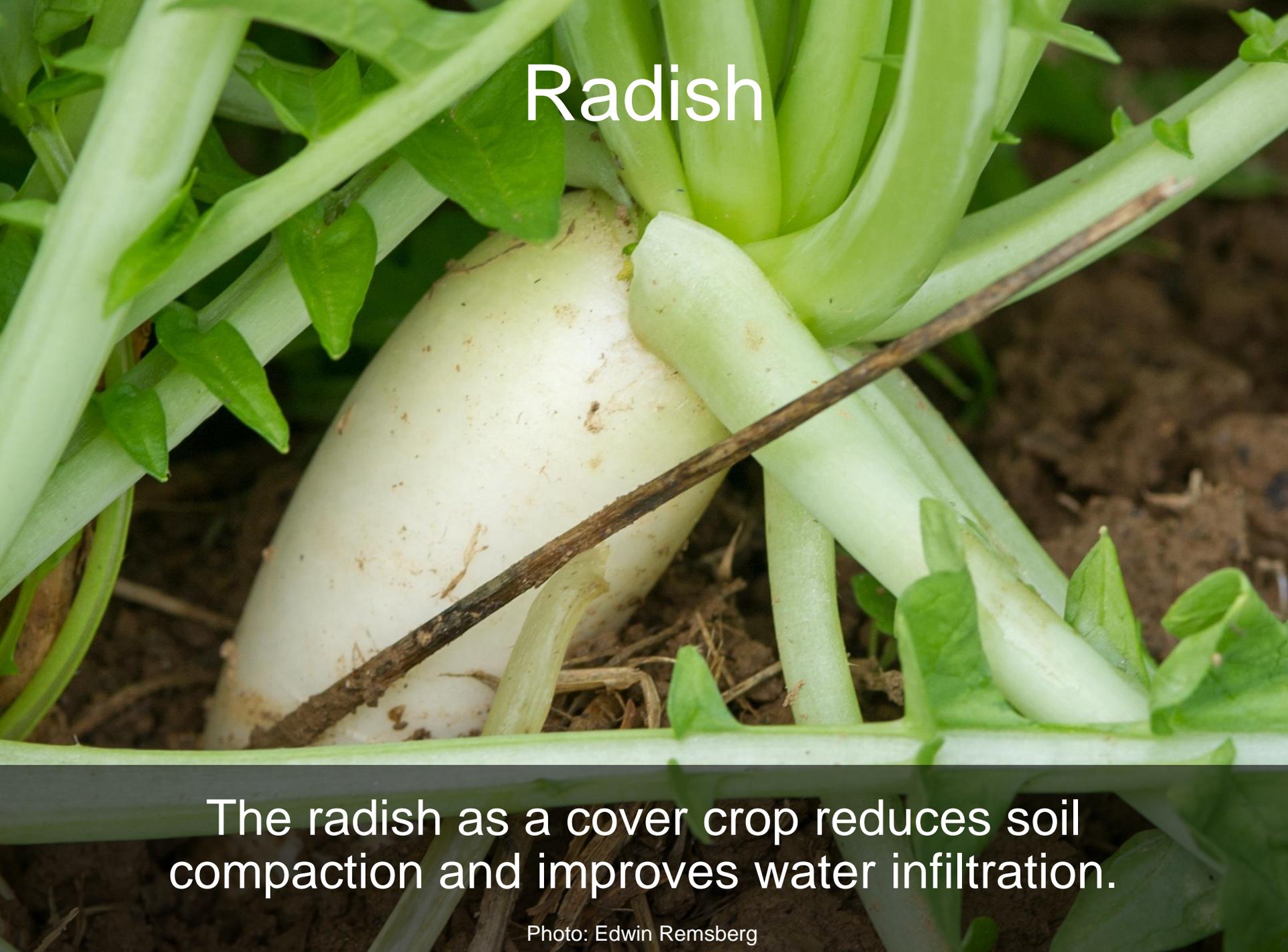
Soil surface cover by residue alone increased infiltration by a median value of 61%.

Residue can't work alone – living root growth plays a role, too.



# How do they do it?

- Prevent soil surface sealing
- Improve soil aggregate stability, soil macroporosity and available water storage capacity
- Feed soil biology – including earthworms
- Reduce soil compaction



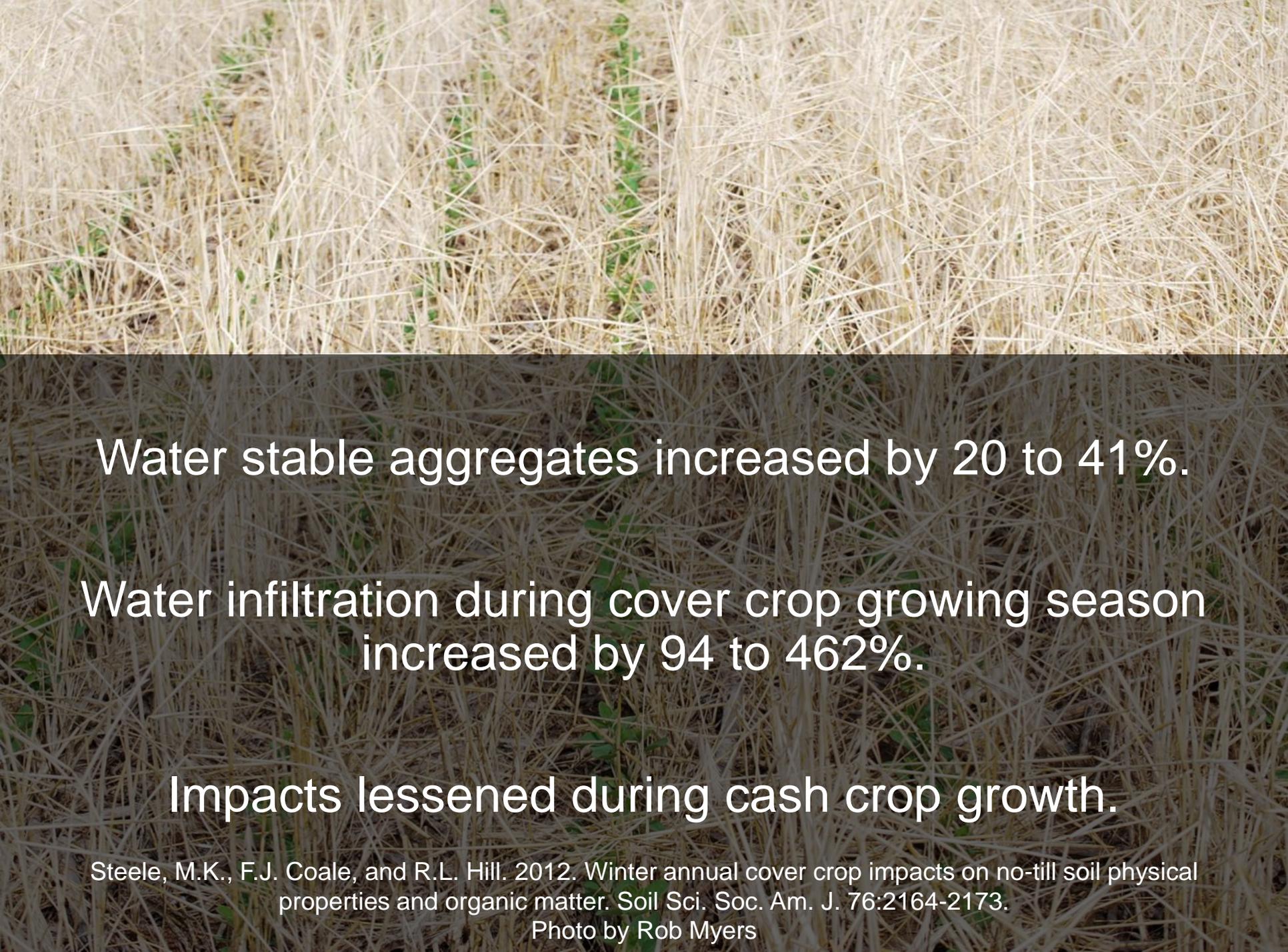
# Radish

The radish as a cover crop reduces soil compaction and improves water infiltration.

Photo: Edwin Remsberg

# Winter annual cover crop impacts on no-till soil properties

- Steele et al. (2012)
- No-till corn production in Maryland
- Trials with and without a winter cereal rye cover crop
- 13-years
- Samples in January and June
- Water infiltration to 7-cm tested



Water stable aggregates increased by 20 to 41%.

Water infiltration during cover crop growing season increased by 94 to 462%.

Impacts lessened during cash crop growth.

Steele, M.K., F.J. Coale, and R.L. Hill. 2012. Winter annual cover crop impacts on no-till soil physical properties and organic matter. *Soil Sci. Soc. Am. J.* 76:2164-2173.

Photo by Rob Myers

Increased water infiltration = reduced runoff



= reduced erosion risk



## And what about erosion?

- Median percent reduction in soil loss: 82%\*
- Mean: 78%\*

\*23 sources, units varied but included mass of sediment per unit area, mass of sediment per unit area over a given timeframe and some that include just the mass of sediment lost.

Photo of buckwheat by Edwin Remsberg

Non-legume cover crops, including cereal rye, were found to reduce soil loss by 30 to 100%.



Photo: Edwin Remsberg



Legume cover crops, like crimson clover, reduced soil loss by 40 to 70% compared to no cover crops.

Photo: Rob Myers

Mustard, a brassica, reduced soil loss by up to 82%.



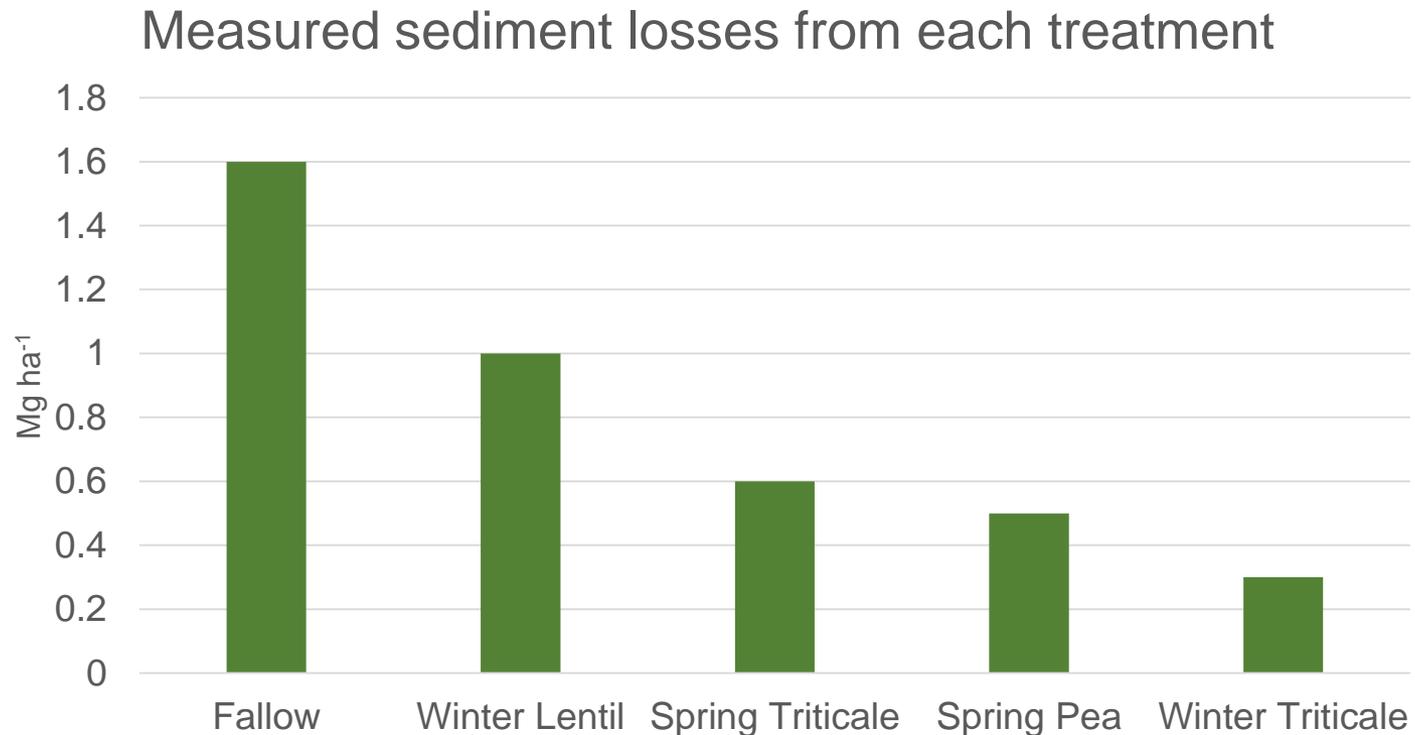
Photo: Edwin Remsberg

# Replacing fallow with cover crops

- Blanco-Canqui et al. (2013)
- Winter wheat production in the Great Plains
- 5-year study
- No-till system
- Cover crops used: yellow sweetclover, winter triticale, winter lentil, spring lentil, spring pea, spring triticale



# Replacing fallow with cover crops



**38 to 81% reduction in sediment losses with cover crops**  
Impacts lessened over time

# How do they do it?

Reduce raindrop impact and risk of soil detachment and transport

- Encourage rainfall infiltration to the soil profile, reducing runoff
- Cover and protect soil surface from erosive forces
- Slow water flow on soil surface
- Roots anchor into the soil profile and hold biomass and soil in place

# Combining Management Strategies: Tillage

- Conservation tillage practices were responsible for an **89% reduction in soil loss** as compared to conventional tillage practices.



Photo: Edwin Remsberg



From theory to practice: what do farmers and ranchers say?

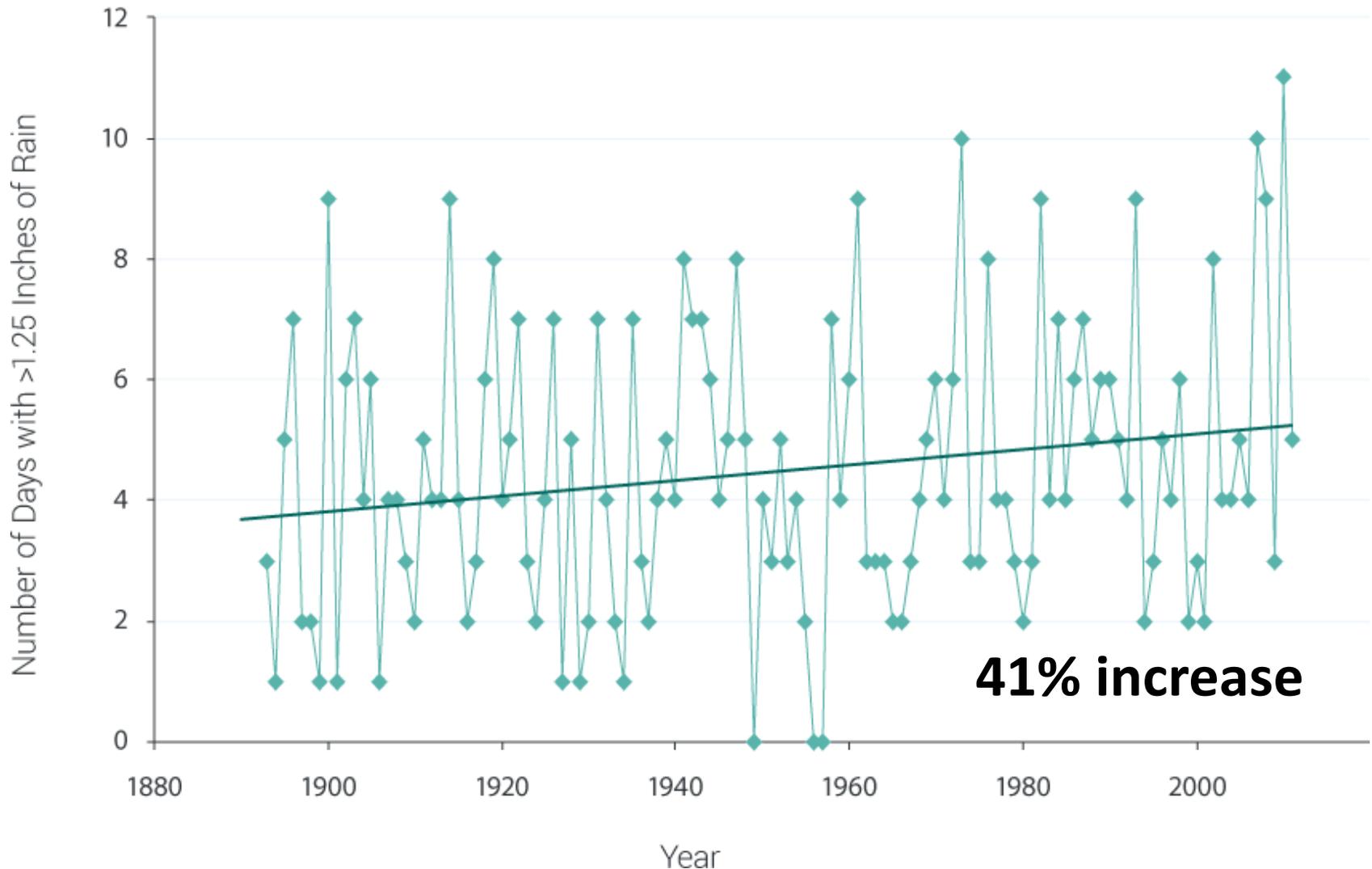
# Ray Gaesser, Iowa

- 5,500 acres
- Corn-soybean, no-till
- 2,500 to 3,000 acres of cereal rye cover crop
- Terraces, cover crops, tile drainage



The greatest impacts of Ray's management decisions can be seen during extreme rainfall events.

## Increasing Heavy Downpours in Iowa



# Noah Williams, Oregon

- Winter wheat, chem-fallow
- 2,800 acres
- 60 acres of cover crops
- Triticale, oats, turnips, forage collards, winter peas, common vetch, safflower, sunflower and phacelia



## Reduced wind erosion risk

Soil under cover crops supported root growth beyond the plow pan (6 to 8 inches) – **signaling reduced compaction.**

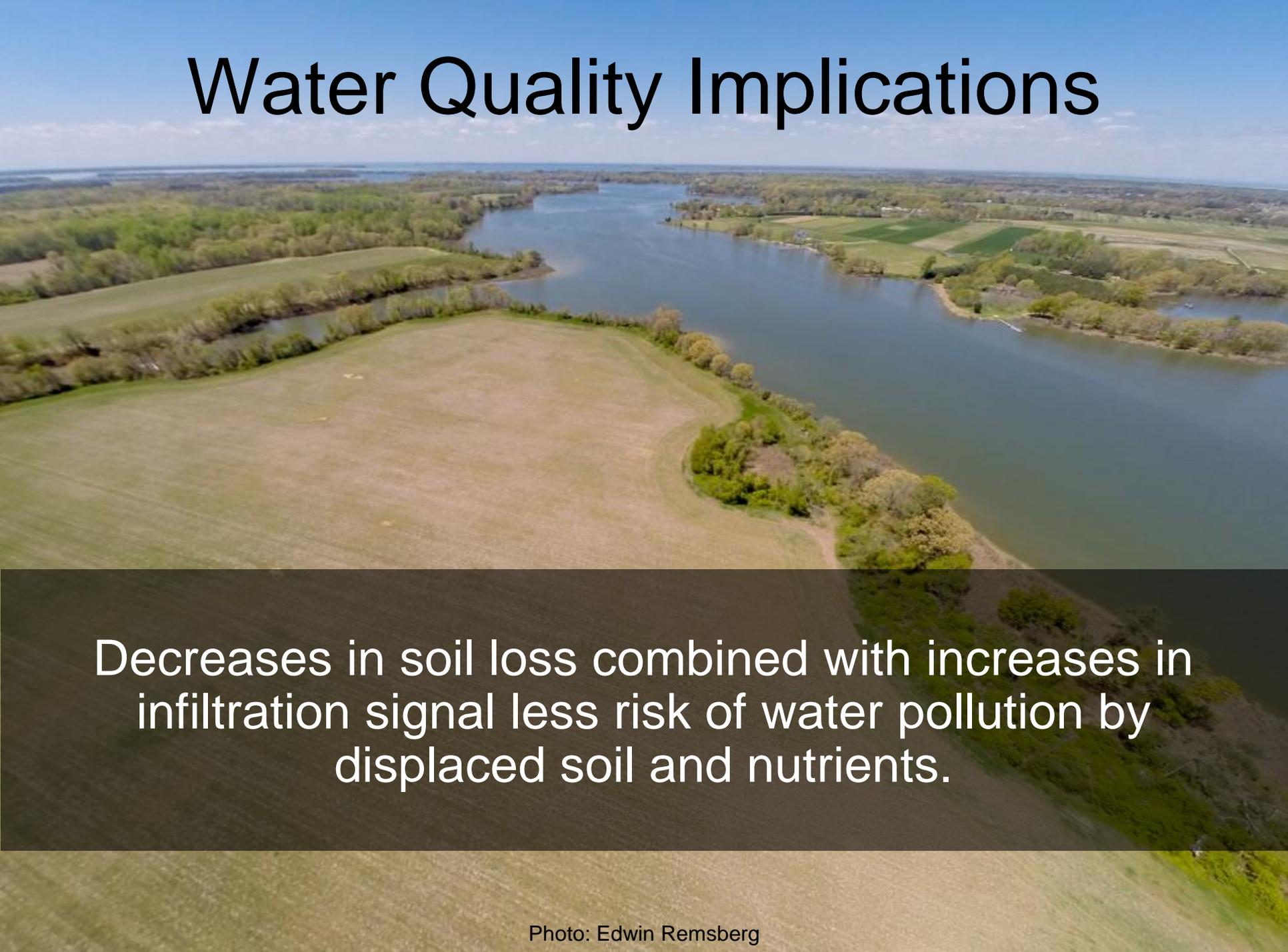
**Cover crop trials saw immediate infiltration**, while rainfall in the control was slow to percolate beyond the first 6-inches.

**Cover cropped fields pick up moisture at depths of one to two feet** whereas control does not.



Noah Williams &  
Garrett Duyck  
(NRCS, OR)

# Water Quality Implications

An aerial photograph showing a large, winding body of water, likely a river or lake, flowing through a rural landscape. The water is a deep blue-green color. The surrounding land is a mix of green fields, some of which appear to be agricultural, and dense green forests. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is a typical rural landscape with a significant water body.

Decreases in soil loss combined with increases in infiltration signal less risk of water pollution by displaced soil and nutrients.

# Takeaways

- Cover crops are proven to prevent soil erosion and increase rainfall infiltration, which ultimately can improve water quality.
- Farmers across the country are seeing this on their own fields.
- To truly achieve these benefits, the best management strategy is to **maintain residue coverage, encourage year-round living roots and have minimal soil disturbance.**

# The True Superheroes of the Soil

The farmers and ranchers using conservation agriculture approaches on their land, and the researchers and conservationists working with them.



Thank you Noah, Garrett and Ray!  
And thanks to Rob Myers and Tom Kaspar!

# Resources

- Resources available at the SARE Cover Crop Topic Room:
  - Cover Crops and Water Quality Resource Series:  
<http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Topic-Rooms/Cover-Crops/Cover-Crops-and-Water-Quality-Resource-Series>
  - Explore cover crop impacts on soil and sediment loss, nutrient losses, water infiltration and soil organic matter
  - Soil health and cover crop illustrations
  - PowerPoint presentation templates
  - Books, bulletins, fact sheets on soil health and cover crops





Thank you!

Photo by Edwin Remsberg