For Immediate Release
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Aerial Applicators Seeding Cover Crops by Air Late Summer and Early Fall

ALEXANDRIA, VA – August 22, 2024 – While farm fields will soon be harvested and the farm season begins to wind down, aerial applicators are still working by seeding cover crops via aircraft. You may continue to hear the hum of an aircraft's engine this fall. One of the most promising conservation practices aerial applicators can assist farmers with is aerially applying cover crop seeds, which are grasses, legumes, small grains, and other low-maintenance crops planted specifically to improve soil health and biodiversity.

Growing cover crops increases soil carbon sequestration, which involves removing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Aerial applicators seed 3.8 million acres of cover crops annually which means they are responsible for helping to sequester 1.9 million metric tons of CO_2 equivalent annually. According to the EPA, this would be the equivalent of removing approximately 412,000 cars with carbon-combustion engines from the roads each year.

Cover crops are important to farmlands because they control erosion; nourish, retain and recycle soil nutrients; build organic matter and add hydration to improve soil health; improve water quality; and break disease and insect cycles. The roots of the cover crop improve soil structure by creating passages that allow for increased moisture and aeration. Soil compaction is essentially eliminated when seeding is done with aerial application.

"Quick growing cover crops stabilize soil, protecting it from wind, rain, and snowmelt erosion," said Andrew D. Moore, chief executive officer of NAAA. "By mitigating erosion and runoff, they ultimately enhance water quality by minimizing sediment in waterways."

Aerial application offers the ability to spread the cover crop seed over the existing cash crop without any disruption to the standing crop, enabling the cover crop to start growing before the cash crop is harvested. Using a drill to plant cover crops requires a terrestrial vehicle, delaying the grower to plant until their cash crop is out of the field. Ground seeding might not offer the best timing for establishing a healthy cover crop, which may not always be ideal, especially in northern regions of the U.S. where early frost can hinder cover crop growth if seeding is delayed. Aerial application can also be used when the soil is wet and can seed many acres quickly. Farmers using climate-smart agricultural conservation practices, such as no-till and cover cropping, may be eligible for the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and Conservation Technical Assistance producer-led grants and cost-share programs.

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The National Agricultural Aviation Association (NAAA) represents the interests of the 1,560 small businesses in the U.S., whose owners and pilots are licensed as professional commercial aerial applicators that use aircraft to enhance food, fiber, and biofuel production, protect forestry and control health-threatening pests. For more information, please visit AgAviation.org.