

## SPOTLIGHT - Mark Peterson working with

### Practical Farmers of Iowa<sup>23</sup>



Credit: Mark and Melanie Peterson

In 2003, as Mark Peterson was trying to decide how to manage the farm he and his wife had just bought, he went to a meeting on organic methods. The presenters were so infectious that he joined their organization - Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) - on the spot. While he didn't go organic, PFI taught him about cover crops and soil health, which did determine the direction of the farm. Mark tells more of his story...

"In fewer than 10 years planting cover crops, we have seen an increase in organic matter in excess of one full percentage point. That's a free 20 pounds of nitrogen and an extra inch of water-holding capacity. That's a benefit in two ways: when we have one of these almost-annual 'hundred-year floods,' the ground will absorb an extra inch, and when it's dry, that's an extra inch of water you're holding on to.

"One piece of land hadn't been treated very well prior to us farming it. Our soil agronomist said it was the lowest fertility level that he'd seen in any piece of ground, with a corn suitability rating (CSR) in the 40s (much Iowa farm ground has a CSR in the 90s). We fumbled with it for a few years and then decided to get drastic.

"It was the first piece that we put out with small grains, followed by a multi-species cover crop. I intended to no-till a crop into the cover crop the next spring, but it grew so well that I was nervous about doing that. So, we made the decision to bring a neighbor's cattle in and process the cover crop into these nice cow pies. They did an awesome job of it. Now we graze all of our multi-species cover crop; I think it's key to get the biology of the manure.

"We did no-till corn into it the next spring, followed by no-till soybeans, and corn again the following year. And that second year corn crop was slightly over 200 bu/acre! On this very low-CSR ground. I was gobsmacked, to say the least. It was unbelievable."