# **Grazing Cover Crops in Annual Cropping Systems**

Sequoia Williams<sup>1,2</sup>, Sarah Light<sup>2</sup>, Morgan Doran<sup>2</sup>, Dan Macon<sup>2</sup>, Kelsey Brewer<sup>1</sup>, Sejin Cheong<sup>3</sup>, Frances Neill<sup>1</sup>, Carolyn Chandler<sup>3</sup>, Oren Hoffman<sup>4</sup>, Kate Scow<sup>4</sup>, Alda F. A. Pires <sup>2,3</sup>, Amélie C.M. Gaudin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Plant Sciences; <sup>2</sup> University of California Cooperative Extension; <sup>3</sup>Department of Population Health and Reproduction, School of Veterinary Medicine University of California - Davis; <sup>4</sup>Department of Land, Air, and Water Resource:

For more information: srwilliams@ucdavis.edu

A 2022 UCCE focus group with local growers (n=8) and ranchers (n=5) found that both groups

- see some to many advantages of grazing on cropland
- would like grazing on cropland encouraged, adopted, and expanded

# What are the potential benefits to growers of grazing cover crops?

- Increased land use efficiency, forage value
- Increased nitrogen (N) availability
- Increased soil health and microbial activity
- Decreased weed pressure and biomass control
- Reduced reliance on fossil fuels/herbicides

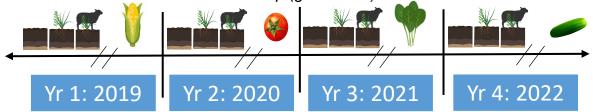
# What concerns might growers have about grazing cover crops?

- Soil compaction risk
- Nitrate leaching risk
- Food safety risk
- Positive soil outcomes take too long to achieve
- Logistical complexity within operation cycle

#### 2019-2022 winter cover crop grazing experiment

Objective: Investigate impacts of cover crops and cover crop grazing on soil health, soil carbon pools, soil nutrient cycling & foodborne pathogen risk in an organic vegetable system

We implemented a maize-tomato-spinach-cucumber rotation on tilled, organic plots at Russell Ranch at UC Davis. There were three different winter treatments: fallow, ungrazed cover crop (ungrazed CC) and grazed cover crop (grazed CC).



# What have we found so far?

- Increase in soil nitrate in grazed CC plots
  - At vegetable planting in Yr3: fallow- 9 lb N/A, ungrazed CC- 28 lb N/A, grazed CC- 27 lb N/A
  - At peak nutrient uptake in Yr3: fallow-22 lb N/A, ungrazed CC- 59 lb N/A, grazed CC- 85 lb N/A
- Nitrate leaching wasn't significantly higher in grazed CC plots, though there were hotspots
- Trends toward higher microbial activity (respirable carbon) in grazed CC plots
  - At peak nutrient uptake in Yr3: 35% increase from fallow, 9% increase from ungrazed CC
- No difference in soil structure or soil compaction (bulk density) between treatments in Yr3
- Emergence of barnyard grass (a summer weed) was suppressed in grazed CC plots
- Higher rainfall and lower soil temperature are associated with greater generic E.coli risk in all treatments -USDA's National Organic Program 90-120 day wait-period between manuring/grazing and harvesting should take into account environmental factors.

# **Future Research Questions**

- What are the *long term effects* of cover crop grazing on soil health in CA?
- What specific *N credits* from grazing can be used to guide nutrient management?
- Does grazing intensity affect soil health outcomes and crop yield?
- What are the economics of implementing grazing on annual land for ranchers and growers?

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