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Does the Corn/Soybean Farmer Have Time for Alternative Crops? [ABSTRACT]

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(173) Does the Corn/Soybean Farmer Have Time for Alternative Crops?

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Diversification of traditional row-crop farming in the Corn Belt is seen as advantageous in providing a wider economic base, decreasing economic risk associated with the link between commodity grain and cattle, increasing net farm income, and increasing biodiversity in the region. As farm size has increased to provide sufficient farm income, farm operations during the critical planting and harvesting windows are seen as limits to additional on-farm enterprises. We conducted a study to see if sufficient labor hours were available for diversification into horticultural crops and the effect on profitability. The labor availability and enterprise schedule of a typical farm producer in eastern Nebraska were determined. This was programmed into a linear programming model along with the enterprise schedules of three supplemental alternative production scenarios to determine the optimal acreage allocation. Results of the study indicate that a significant amount of underutilized labor exists in a typical corn-soybean rotation and the integration of additional crops is feasible. Grazing of stalk residues alone increased producer profitability but did not make use of the underutilized labor; however, full integration of livestock should be further explored. Integration of two alternative cabbage production scenarios as well as an agroforestry alternative that included decorative woody florals made use of the underutilized labor and increased profitability. Due to market constraints associated with the woody florals, the winter wheat/fall cabbage production scenario was the most successful option. Overall, the integration of supplemental alternative crops has the ability to make use of seasonal underutilized labor in a corn-soybean rotation typical to midwestern agriculture.

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