

QUICK FACTS

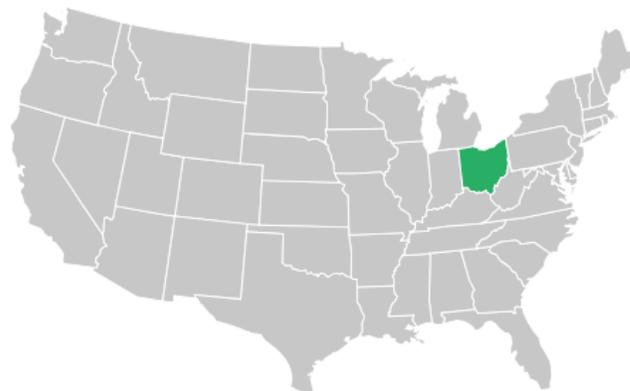
Name: Sunrise Cooperative, Inc.

Ownership: 100% Farmer-Owned

Headquarters: Fremont, Ohio

Locations: 33

Employees: Approximately 300



Sunrise Cooperative, Inc. is an agricultural, grain, feed, crop insurance and energy cooperative formed from a series of mergers since the early 90s. In 2016, Sunrise merged with Trupointe Cooperative, keeping the Sunrise name. The company is 100% farmer owned and has 33 locations throughout Ohio. Sunrise Agronomy has a team of expert agronomists, certified crop advisers, precision ag specialists and custom applicators. The team has always supported farmers in adopting cover crops, but in the past eight years, water quality has become a major factor for increasing that role. Cover crops have become a natural extension of the company’s goal to “do things right for the customer and the land.”

One Customer’s Experiment, NRCS Support

Joe Steinberger, CCA and Agronomy Solutions Advisor at Sunrise, says the cooperative’s involvement in cover crops came not so much as a management decision, but as a gradual process. “We responded to customers’ needs and it evolved from there.”

As an example, he recalls working with one customer whose 350-acre farm had a problem with clay soil making drainage particularly difficult. Water was sitting in some fields. With support from Joe, the farmer decided to try out a cover crop, a mix of radishes and rye, on a wheat field of about 15 acres where drainage was especially bad. They were pleased and impressed to see that the cover crop broke up the hard pan and allowed water to drain. It proved an effective strategy to deal with soil loss, poor filtration, late planting and lower yields. After planting the corn no-till into the terminated cover crop, Joe said, “that was actually the best yield for that particular field ever.”

The customer’s neighbor across the road, having seen the positive results, also started working with Sunrise, planting cover crops to address a similar drainage problem on his own farm. “After that point, Joe

notes, “I kind of started really pushing the cover crops on the heavier clay soils to break them up, to get the better nutrients.”

That farmer is now in the NRCS EQIP program for cover crops and nutrient management, and he is using cover crops on approximately one-half of his farm. Joe emphasizes the positive impact the EQIP program has on farmers’ willingness to try cover crops. He feels this has substantially increased the demand for these products and services, and it dovetails well with the cooperative’s priorities. “I one hundred percent believe in cover crops, so any time I can help push the information out I think it's good.”

Lessons Learned

Among his success stories, Joe has seen a few that actually started as a major learning curve. One instance he will never forget was when a customer planted rye as a cover crop, but in the spring, when they sprayed glyphosate to terminate it, the rye refused to die. They had carefully applied the correct rate to kill grass of that height, but the temperature was too cold for the herbicide to take effect. Even after a second spraying when the next crop of soybeans had been planted, the rye persisted. Worse, some of it made grain, and the rye was spread again at combine time. It was a hard way to learn that when you terminate rye, you’d better choose a day with favorable temperature and sunlight.

This is clearly not Joe’s favorite memory, yet he is quick to note that this same farmer has kept experimenting and learning over the years, and he is now cover cropping 100% of his land. Joe says, “He knows for a fact that the cover crops are helping his soil.” On some fields, he is getting good soybean crops where he had never been able to before, and he attributes this to cover crops.

Working along the learning curve—with their farmer customers—Sunrise offers these additional lessons for other ag retailers interested in offering cover crop products and services:

1) Learn from experience

Ag retailers and CCAs can learn from their own mishaps in the same way that farmers learn from theirs. An internal process by which team members can systematically share their pivotal experiences in the business of advising on cover crops will help younger team members improve their understanding and expertise in cover crops.

2) Make no promises

Even if a given management practice has achieved the desired results in one climate or set of local conditions, it is no guarantee it will perform equally in others. CCAs and their colleagues need the flexibility to present the various options in light of what all farmers know intuitively—that there are no promises in agriculture.

3) Troubleshoot and communicate problems locally

An online communications or educational platform is a powerful way to share valuable local information. The online SKN (Sunrise Knowledge Network), established in 2013, shares updates, educational videos, forums and blogs. For instance, if an area is experiencing insect or disease problems, fellow agronomists can be aware of a potential disaster heading their way.

4) Prepare for logistical challenges

One key potential issue is the need to have separate machinery for delivery and application of a cover crop when necessary. Sunrise has learned this lesson with rye, to avoid unintentional seeding into wheat fields.

5) Plan ahead for providing cover crop seed

With cover crops increasing in popularity, ag retailers are starting to encounter challenges in seed availability. This year was the first year Sunrise had a shortage of rye seed for cover crops.

Keys to Success

Chris Horning, Assistant Sunrise Precision Services (SPS) Manager, shares Joe's perspective that there are no promises or guarantees with cover crops, either for the farmer or the agricultural retailer. Still, Sunrise can draw from its experience to share the elements of success in their own cover crop program:

1) Start by understanding the customer's goals

In Joe's words, "The first question you have to ask the customer is, 'What do you want to obtain? Are you trying to obtain nitrogen credits? Are you trying to obtain soil health? Are you trying to obtain better soil conditions?'" Depending on what the customer wants to accomplish, each bit of advice can vary considerably, beginning with what cover crop seed or mix to select.

2) Communicate with local NRCS staff

Involvement in cover crops has led Joe and his colleagues to be in closer communication with their local NRCS location, an important relationship for sharing up-to-date information and ensuring that farmers receive consistent messages to support their decision making.

3) Provide hands-on knowledge resources to growers

The online Sunrise Knowledge Network includes several videos on cover crops and relevant sessions at grower meetings. The cooperative has one or two grower meetings per year at their research locations, each with five to six sessions. They also take advantage of webinars such as those offered by Platform for Agricultural Risk Management (PARM) and other programs with valuable content to be shared with farmer customers.

As for business success, Sunrise has had a positive experience with the sale of cover crop seeds and herbicides, and both of these sales categories are growing. The cooperative has not found all cover crop products and services to be profitable in themselves, however. Rather, the business case for these offerings lies in making sure the cooperative continues to serve its customers by meeting their needs—and this, increasingly, involves learning about cover crops. One of the most important benefits is customer retention. For Chris, an additional indication that the business is benefitting—both for the farmer and Sunrise—is when a customer who struggled in the first year of adoption keeps trying, and improving, in subsequent years.

Looking Ahead

After a notable increase in cover crop adoption in recent years, an estimated 35% of Sunrise customers now plant some type of cover crop. Growing cover crop seed sales are an encouraging sign that cover crop acreage is increasing. Joe expects to see future growth, but perhaps at a relatively modest rate, now that the wave of early adopters may be giving way to the “stragglers.” Ohio’s increasing water quality concerns will likely continue to spur farmers to try cover crops as a best management practice for water quality, and Sunrise intends to keep helping them succeed.

For Joe and Chris, a top priority is to continue to learn from direct experience with cover crops. “If we don’t stay ahead of the ever-changing environment,” says Chris, “we won’t be able to bring our customers the best solutions needed.” They look forward to working closely with customers, NRCS and others to improve the knowledge base. “Anything we can gain from that and pass on to our growers—which a big part of that is cover crop management—in the end, that’s a win for our growers, which is going to end up being a win for our company.”



Agronomy Solutions Advisor Joe Steinberger holding a daikon radish used as a cover crop

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