

# Estimating Residue Using the Line-Transect Method

Nyle C. Wollenhaupt and John Pingry

Soil erosion can be substantially reduced, and in some fields controlled, by keeping the land surface partially covered with crop residue. As little as a 30% ground cover (measured immediately after planting) can reduce erosion by 50%.



30% Ground Cover

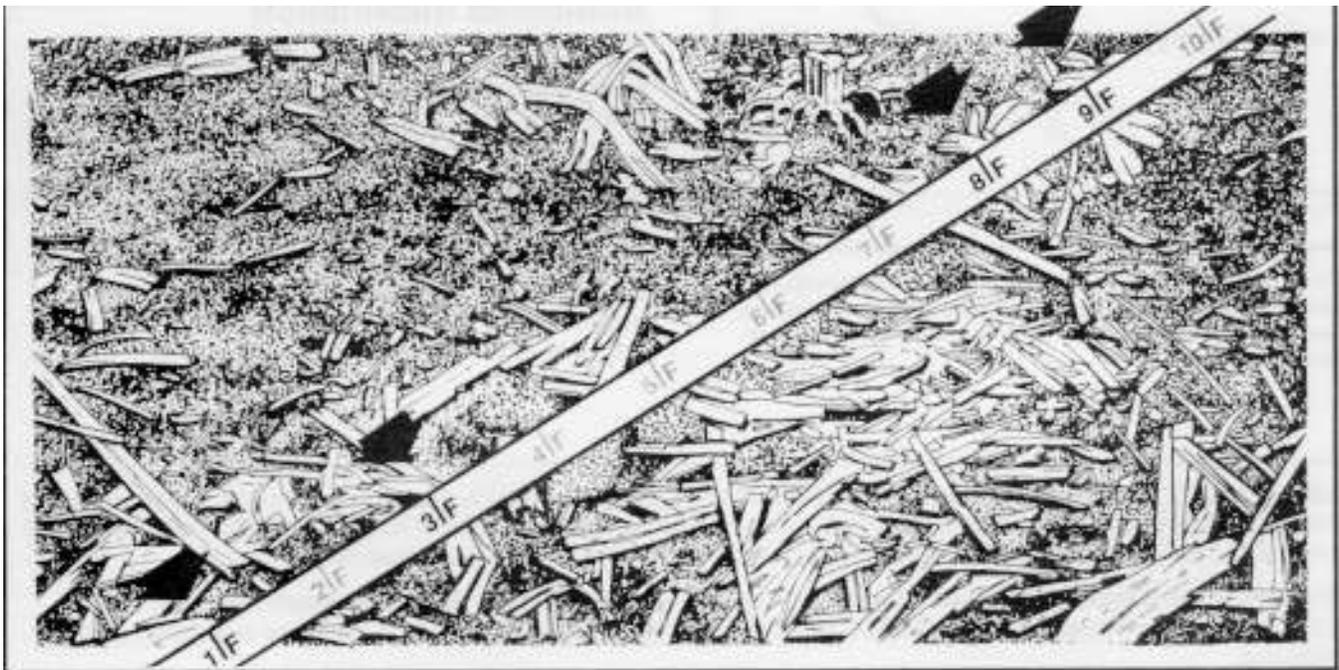
Many Wisconsin farmers have chosen conservation tillage (30% or more ground cover) as part of their conservation compliance plan. To implement and check

conservation plans, producers, consultants and agency professionals need to use reliable residue measurement techniques.

Residue can be measured using a variety of methods including photographic, meterstick, and line-transect. The line-transect method has emerged as the preferred method for field use (Lafren et al., 1981). This procedure involves stretching a line diagonal to the crop rows and recording whether or not residue intersects the line at specified points.

## Equipment

The line may be a wire cable with beads or tabs attached at a fixed spacing, a knotted rope or a tape measure. The line should be 100-foot long with markings at 1-foot intervals or 50-foot long with markings at 6-inch

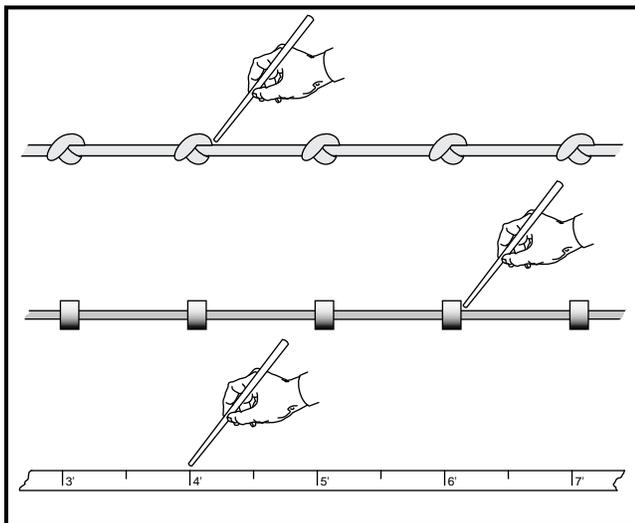


Lay out a 100-foot line across crop rows at a 45-degree diagonal. Anchor both ends in a row. Look straight down at each 1-foot mark, always choosing the same point on the line. Count the number of times that a piece of crop residue intersects the line at the 1-foot marks. Arrows highlight recording points which intersect residue. (Illustration courtesy University Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia)

spacings. The idea is that each time you stretch the line and record residue intersects, you will evaluate 100 points. This will keep calculations simple.

## Sources of Error

The main source of error with this technique is the tendency to adjust one's line of site when looking down at the intersection points on the line. To keep this error to a minimum always read from the same side of the tape or in the case of a knotted rope or cable, the same corner of the knot or tab junction with the line. To maintain a constant line of site, obtain a  $\frac{3}{32}$  inch diameter ( ) brazing rod or wooden dowel from a farm supply or hardware store and hold it at each line intersection point. Imagine that the rod tip represents a raindrop and ask the question: Will the residue at the point of measurement absorb most of the raindrop impact?



Three common types of lines used to measure residue transect: knotted rope, cable with tabs and tape measure. Readings should always be taken from the same point or corner on the line.

## Procedure

The following is a step-by-step procedure for using the line transect method to measure the percentage of crop or plant residue ground cover.

**Step one:** Lay out a 100- or 50-foot line diagonal to row direction. Anchor both ends in a row. Avoid placing the line in end rows and areas affected by flooding, drought, weed or insect infestations.

**Step two:** Walk along the line or tape and look straight down at each recording point. Record the number of points that are directly over a piece of residue. As you record numbers, remember to

- always look at the same side of the line,
- avoid moving the tape while counting, and
- look straight down.

There will be some judgment calls. To decide whether the residue intersects the mark, ask yourself this: If a raindrop falls at this point on the line, will it hit crop residue or bare soil? If you have any doubt whether the point intersects residue, or if the residue looks too small to intercept a raindrop, don't count it.

**Step three:** The total number of intersections you found equals the percentage of ground surface covered by residue. If 44 out of 100 points intersect residue, then you have 44 percent residue coverage in this area of the field.

**Step four:** Repeat the procedure at five different locations in the field and average the results to arrive at an estimate of residue cover for the entire field.

## Additional Information

Covin, T.S., and J.E. Gilley. 1987. Crop residue: soil erosion combatant. *Crops and Soils Magazine*. April-May p. 7-9.

Lafren, J.M., M. Amemiya and E.A. Hintz. 1981. Measuring crop residue cover. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*. November-December p. 341-343.

Shelton, D.P., E.C. Dickey, P.J. Jasa, R. Kanable and S. R. Smydra. 1990. Using the line-transect method to estimate percent residue cover. *NebGuide G90-981*. Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE

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