

Kansas wheat crop in need of fall moisture

Wheat is a resilient crop, thanks in part to the cutting edge genetics that modern varieties have, but even the hardiest of plants need a rain every now and then. At the November 19th meeting of the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, board members from across the state reported on current crop conditions and expected acres in their areas.

One theme through the meeting was the need for a refreshing drink for newly planted wheat. While subsoil moisture is adequate in many areas of the state, the moisture below our feet is quickly being used up while the top soil statewide is 'bone dry.' Michael Jordan, Beloit, reported that his local weather station has only recorded one precipitation event of 0.02" of moisture since his wheat was planted. Chris Tanner, Norton, said that his area has seen no measurable precipitation since the third week of August.

While the lack of moisture is a serious hurdle for newly planted and emerged wheat, it did make for a quick fall harvest for many farmers. This is a stark contrast to last year when substantial rains led to delays in fall harvest which meant that many expected acres of wheat were left unplanted. This year's efficient fall harvest means that wheat acres in central Kansas may be up in comparison to 2018, but board members in nearly all other areas of the state reported either a drop in acres (around 10-15%) or acres left unchanged.

Kyler Millershaski, Lakin, reported that 75% percent of his planted acres are up and have a good visible stand, but the rest is yet to emerge. The lack of moisture will hinder root development, so Millershaski is predicting that grazing in the area will be too risky of an endeavor unless some moisture starts to help develop those root systems.

Justin Knopf, Gypsum, said that acres in his area may be increased, but farmers have run out of moisture to justify planting more acres. Knopf's area was hit particularly hard with rains and flooding last year, so to go from finding a fish in the middle of a wheat field (something that really happened to him after flooding had receded) to needing a rain to get next year's crop 'off the ground' highlights the extremes that farmers have to work through year after year to raise their crops.

Knopf has mentally split his crop into thirds. He said the first third that was planted looks pretty decent at the moment. The middle third is emerged, but looks mediocre and has little root development. The last third has not emerged yet.

Michael Jordan also reported that a sharp decrease in temperature toward the end of October meant extreme damage to his newly planted wheat.

"About two to three days after it emerged, temperatures plummeted to about 4 degrees

Fahrenheit and killed those plants to the ground. I'm not sure if it will come back or not," Jordan said.

Eric Sperber, Colby, has heard a mixed bag of acre reports from his area. Sperber, an associate board member, has a unique perspective with the connections he has with his clients at Cornerstone Ag, the company where Sperber is the CEO. These customers help him get the big picture of production in the area. While some producers are decreasing acres due to low grain prices, he reported that one producer will be increasing his planted acres 25%.

"He said that he's found wheat is a really important part of his cropping rotation," Sperber said. "After years of planting dryland corn on dryland corn, he recognized that he needs to add wheat back into his rotation to deal with weed pressure and a host of other agronomic reasons. Planting shouldn't just be based on the economics of the grain across the scale at this point; wheat offers many other advantages in a modern farm operation."

Sperber also reported that hard white wheat acres will be slightly higher than last year in the Colby region.

Jay Armstrong, Muscotah, agreed on the unseen value in wheat in his area.

"The grain price is down, which means that the already limited planting in my area will decrease even more," said Armstrong. "But that means the price of straw will be good and that'll help cover costs."

Chris Tanner said that many in his area are looking forward to 2019 coming to an end, as it was a tough year for farmers across the country. The noticeable lack of rain in the area will put even more pressure on next year's wheat crop. Tanner reported that he has already penciled in the numbers for harvest 2020, and in order to break even on costs, he'll need to raise 80 bushels to an acre, a number that quickly feels further out of reach with each dry day.

Ken Wood, Chapman, also reported the cold snap a few weeks causing visible damage to his crop.

"I'm not sure how much this damage this freeze will have on the final yield numbers, but the wheat sure doesn't look pretty," said Wood. "It's amazing how much difference a year can make. Last year at this time we were drowning. This year our crop just really needs a rain."

While these farmers have very different farming operations and recipes for success on their own land, moisture is the key that can make or break-even the crop raised with the best management practices currently available. Maybe this quote, from an unknown author, frames it best.

"Man - despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication and his many accomplishments - owes his existence to a six inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it

rains."