

Staying optimistic on wheat

It doesn't take very long while driving down the road to notice that things this spring are looking especially green and healthy. For wheat farmers this year, particularly dryland farmers, hopes are high for a good crop yield come harvest time. In fact, the anticipation has been building over the winter with all the moisture we have received in some parts of the region.

The normal precipitation from October through April for New Mexico State University's Agricultural Science Center north of Clovis is just under five inches. Since October of 2009 up until now, we've received more than eight inches. While there is still a lot of time to go until harvest and more rain will be needed to finish the crop, we are certainly looking good out of the gate and even down the backstretch.

However, as temperatures rise and the wind blows, the wheat crop will start to require large amounts of water in order to complete its life cycle as it goes through head emergence, flowering and grain filling. Rate of water use thus far on this year's crop has been relatively low compared to what it is about to start using. Wheat water use peaks at heading and flowering and a crop can easily use more than three-tenths of an inch of water per day. A soil that may contain as much as six inches of available water can be exhausted very rapidly at that rate. So, we're not out of the woods yet!

Another plus for this year's crop is

that, for a lot of acres, there has been very little, if any, insect pressure. Last year was a terrible year with respect to dry weather (between November and May, there was less than two inches precipitation in some places), but the aphids (i.e., greenbugs and Russian Wheat Aphids) really did a number on the wheat. While some areas have reported aphid problems, reports are not nearly as widespread and reoccurring as last year. A couple of late freezes last spring further harmed the wheat that was already stressed from drought and insects. Freezes late in the life cycle of the plant reduce yield and quality of the harvested grain.

Disease is another issue that wheat producers have to contend with from time to time. In wet years, fungal diseases, such as rust, may become a problem; although these are much less common than the viral diseases that seem to be popping up more and more. In 2005, we had a rare occurrence of a rust outbreak that was brought about by a very rainy spring. That year was definitely the exception, rather than the rule. There are at least three virus-

es that can infect wheat and all three have shown up in our area consistently. These are especially detrimental because there is no treatment once the plant is infected. Thus far, reports have been few, but that doesn't mean we won't see several cases this year.

So, compared to the recent past, we're in great shape. Last year was a bust; this year may be a "bin-buster." What a difference a year makes! Barring any natural disaster and with a few more timely rains as we make the turn for home, many dryland growers are potentially looking at a bountiful harvest. Now, if we could only get the price of wheat to stop dropping. Ideally, we like to see wheat in excellent condition combined with high market prices, but rarely do these two components come together. Such is the life of the farmer, take what you can get and make the most of it. Our area has the potential to be great wheat country when the weather cooperates. This time around, we may just get it right. The finish line is in sight, but there are potential hurdles all along the way. I hope that we can finish strong.

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