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Field Crops Newslette - April 2007

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In General:

A large percentage of the corn crop has been planted. I don't believe anyone really has a good handle on just how much has been planted, or how much more may be planted following the rain we are receiving as I write today. Every year has its unusual facets, and I suppose one of this year's will be a March without rain. The clear weather allowed some of the most efficient field work ever, and as long as soil moisture lasted the seed germinated and emerged well. We have a lot more to do in getting the 2007 crop off to a good start; but we can catch our breath for a couple of days as fields soak up this rain.

Corn:

I believe we have planted almost every corn variety that has performed reasonably well in our trials, plus some that have only been tested in neighboring states. So far, I have not seen or heard of any problem with germination or emergence. Some fields were planted at depths of nearly three inches to reach deep moisture, and are emerging well. I hope this will finally convince some doubters that corn has the ability to emerge well from greater depths than they believed.

Our biggest concern for emerged corn, as the drought deepened was the threat of chinch bugs. This pest had been found in quite a few fields; but the seed treatments were working well in controlling them and suppressing their reproduction. Now that we have been blessed with rain, I believe this destructive pest will fade into the background, at least for the time being, and corn will develop well. We still need to visit fields on a regular basis and check for cutworms, stinkbugs, and chinchbugs. All of these pests, and others, can develop quickly and thrive under conditions that are surprising, so don't turn your back on them for a minute.

The results that will be achieved with pre-emergence herbicides may be less than desirable since there was no rain to activate them for weeks. I am already seeing treated fields with several kinds of grass and small-seeded broadleaf weeds. Control of these weeds should be our primary goal as soon as we can

return to fields following the rain. The RR system will no doubt prove valuable in this situation; but other products will also get the job done. Some areas have planted quite a lot of conventional corn this year, so the "alternative" OT (over the top) products will be needed. Apply these products to young weeds that are actively growing, and carefully check to make sure that the product you choose is rated well for the weeds you have.

This has been the ideal rain for activation of fertilizers, particularly nitrogen. Many of you have surface-applied N, and you might have lost a significant portion of it to a heavy downpour; however this rain has fallen almost perfectly to move surface N into the soil before any water began flowing from fields. I can't say you've had no loss of N; however the loss should be minimal. Here at Kosciusko, we have received around 1.25 inches over about a 12-hour period, and I have yet to see significant runoff. The soil is absorbing every drop, and with it nitrogen is moving into the soil where it will be protected from further loss. For those who will apply nitrogen as a sidedress, this should be done as soon following the rain as possible in order for the soil to receive it well and for moisture to help it diffuse away from the application zone quickly. Another reason for applying sidedress N soon is to avoid damage to roots that will quickly be growing outward toward the middle. A rule of thumb is that at this stage roots will normally extend as far outward as the height of plants. With six-inch corn plants, roots may be expected to be at least six inches to either side of the drill. Following the dry period, they may be even longer. A quick check with a hand spade would be a good idea; then you can move the knives or coulters out to avoid roots as much as possible.

Soybeans:

We have been busy with corn planting, and I am aware of only a few soybean fields that have been planted so far. I expect that some of you will begin planting beans following the rain. We probably should have planted more beans this year as a way of avoiding some of the storage crunch this fall; but corn prices were

too attractive for that. There was a concern that elevators would be too busy with the corn harvest to deal with soybeans, and some elevators discouraged the planting of beans.

When you think about it, soybeans are probably the best energy crop. The oil can be extracted without the use of large amounts of heat from other energy sources, and the crop does not require nitrogen fertilizers that require the use of tremendous amounts of natural gas. But then, most of our automobiles are gasoline-burners, and the most logical fuel product from soybean is soy-diesel. With more of the big diesel trucks as well as construction and farm equipment burning soy-diesel, which they will without significant modification, there would be more gasoline for the smaller vehicles. There is probably some flaw in my thinking that some smart person could bring to my attention, but that's the way it looks to me.

For several years, we have planted significant amounts of soybeans by this time, but this year most of the crop will be planted later. It seems that most of you are moving toward somewhat later maturing varieties because of this. The goal is to have beans mature after corn is harvested. Most of the requests for variety suggestions have been for mid to late Group 5 varieties, but there will also be significant amounts of late Group 4 varieties planted. So far I have not been asked about Group 6 varieties, and Group 3's have not been mentioned to me. Keep in mind that maturity group designations are somewhat deceiving. An example of this is a trial of about eighty "Early Group 5" varieties published in the 2006 Mississippi Soybean Variety Trials. With the trial planted on April 14, 2006, maturity dates ranged from as early as September 1 to as late as October 7. In truth, there were some late Group 4's and some early Group 6 varieties in that test. Before you hang your hat on when your beans will mature, refer to the trial data so you will know what to expect. Maturity designations vary a lot among varieties and seed companies, and also within varieties as the result of several factors including planting date, weather, soil fertility, and other factors.

I will make one suggestion that I believe many of you have already made with soybeans: that you use seed that is treated with both good fungicides and an approved seed-treatment insecticide. The results we have seen from field trials have shown excellent response in the form of greatly improved early season growth, free of what we formerly accepted as "below-threshold" feeding by insects like thrips, leaf beetles, three-cornered alfalfa leafhoppers, and other pests. If

there has been a recent breakthrough in soybean production, this may be it.

Cotton:

Following this very timely rain, you still have time to plant more corn if that is your choice, or to begin planting soybeans. Both crops are attractive with regard to price; however it seems that cotton is finally responding to the fact that 2007 cotton acreage will be extremely low, relative to recent years. I said this earlier in the year; but I will say again, that cotton acreage could fall below 500,000 acres in Mississippi in 2007. I am certainly no expert on this, and I am only reflecting comments I have heard from growers. I will not be surprised if we continue planting soybeans and corn for another two weeks, leaving barely enough land for cotton to run gins this fall. The harvest color in Mississippi will change this year from white to yellow.

Cotton prices are moving in on the sixty-cent mark now, but this increase will not make a lot of difference until we pass the target price level of seventy-two cents. Only then will growers begin to see some "daylight" and be encouraged to plant cotton. I doubt this can be expected in time to affect this year's plantings much, but the effect will probably be reflected in offerings for 2008 crop cotton as soon as "reality" sets in and buyers realize that the "pipeline" is about to get low.

Variety selection has been extremely variable this year, and some have not made selections yet as they continue shrinking cotton acreage and expanding corn. Most people who have made selections seem to be sticking to the best BR varieties for the bulk of their plantings, along with RR and RF varieties for refuge. The amount of Flex will probably increase percentage-wise but not acreage-wise. The really surprising thing is that several growers are planning to grow conventional varieties this year, even though seed of these varieties are difficult to find. They cite resistant weeds and tech fees as their motivation; but some are doing it as a way to justify keeping their valuable labor. The costs that would normally go to tech fees will be diverted to payroll and to other forms of weed and insect control. I hope this works for those who choose to do it.

The question is "Can we still grow conventional cotton"? The answer, as long as we still have a full complement of good weed and insect control options, is yes. The decision to grow conventional cotton must be predicated on another decision to dedicate more management skill and time to the crop. Of course it will be easier with fewer acres.

A return to conventional cotton does not require that we abandon glyphosate. It does mean that we will use this product as burndown in combination with residuals such as diuron; then other residuals plus more glyphosate behind the planter. Then the decision will be whether to use high-cost selective OT products, conventional post-directed applications, or glyphosate in combination with residuals under hoods. It also means that we can return to glyphosate as part of defoliation since it is good at retarding regrowth in conventional varieties. Growing conventional also means accepting more risk.

The question of insects in conventional and RR varieties is a big one. Since Bt was introduced in 1996, we have not seen the kind of worm outbreak that burned 1995 into our minds. However, other pests like plantbugs, stinkbugs, and mites that are not controlled by transgenic traits have taken their places as primary threats. I believe it's pretty well accepted that the reason for the upswing in these pests is that producers are not spraying for weevils and worms as in the past; however that point can be debated several ways. Much of the chemistry we were using pre-Bt is no longer available, or has been set aside in favor of other products; this may be part of the reason for pest shifts.

Wheat:

Some of the earliest planted wheat is starting to head now, and the rest will be heading very soon. The dry March has actually been good for wheat since the crop is well adapted to this kind of environment. Dry weather has slowed the development of diseases that can be a major problem for wheat. Aphids have been scattered, but very few in the Hill area fields I have visited. Rain has arrived almost perfectly for heading wheat.

Weed control is generally good in wheat, with the few unintentional "check plots" or missed spots showing what fields would have looked like without weed control applications. If your wheat just does not seem to be as vigorous as you would like, or if you planned to make a boot application of N, it's time to do that as plants begin to produce heads. A small shot of dry N (20 to 25 pounds of N) now in the form of urea, AN, or ammonium sulfate will allow the crop to more completely fill the kernels to their potential. It should be applied after dew has dried to avoid burn. I am

expecting some good yields from wheat this year, and I hope we get good weather for the harvest.

The question of double-cropping after wheat is a tricky one. With the chance of more of the type of weather we have already seen, it is my opinion that soybeans will be too risky unless you have the capability to irrigate. Several people have asked me about cotton as a double crop after wheat. This has been done through the years with varying success; but I can't recommend it to anyone as a good practice. We all know that June-planted cotton can produce well in some years, but late season weather is a critical factor that can't be planned for. A good early-maturing variety, combined with extremely good early fruit set are necessary for this to work. If you are interested in this, give me a call and let's look at it together. A good price increase for cotton after all the corn and soybeans are planted could be a big factor in a decision to take this kind of risk.

In Conclusion:

I apologize to those who read this in other areas that did not receive this recent rain. I have mentioned rain several times because it was critical for our local crops to continue developing, and for us to complete plantings of corn and soybeans. Hopefully, other areas had already received rain, or will very soon. The crop year has gotten off to a good start overall for this area, but it seems that limited moisture may haunt us as it did in 2006. Rain is essential for both dryland and irrigated crops, either to produce good yields or to hold down costs, respectively. The dryland farmer may produce lower yields without rain, but irrigated farmers may have profits taken away by fuel expense. As they say, "it's six of one and a half dozen of the other".

I will end with the old Irish prayer: May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm on your face, the rain fall softly on your fields; and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

Sincerely,



Ernest H. Flint, Ph.D., CCA
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