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Field Crops Newsletter - September 2008

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In General:

This year has been like riding a roller-coaster, with one shocking plunge after another related to commodity prices, production costs, weather, and politics. Any one of these could have provided enough “excitement” for the year; but we’ve had them all together. The latest thrill is the combination of falling prices and hurricanes. Are you having fun yet?

Corn:

Spring rains and cool weather delayed planting, and led to significant replanting. Then we had a drought that threatened to crash the dryland crop. Rains came just in time to save most of the crop; but some fields had gone too far by then. The floodgates opened as the crop was maturing, bringing heavy rains and wind that threatened to blow fields down. Now comes the hurricane season with a lot more rain.

Almost miraculously, most of the crop has remained standing, although many fields have areas that are down or leaning. Many fields have from 5 to 10 percent of stalks that have broken or root-lodged, while others have almost no lodging at all. Combines were rolling at every opportunity until Tuesday afternoon (Sept. 9th) when dark skies delivered another 2 to 3 inches of rain to most of Central Mississippi. We have a long way to go still. A few localities have made significant progress, with a very few growers having crossed the finish line.

The advantage of having at least some of the crop planted to early-maturing varieties has helped several farms. The difference between 110 and 118 day maturity has been an advantage for these folks, and I expect we may see more of this in the future, at least on a portion of our fields. These varieties allowed them to get started earlier, and deliver corn before the rush. Yields from these varieties have been very respectable, rivaling some of the “full-season” varieties that are more commonly planted. We have to be very careful in selecting early maturing corn varieties since they differ greatly in their adaptation to our area.

At least one of my variety trials has revealed notable differences among varieties with regard to stalk strength and resistance to lodging. We have done ratings there which will be useful in selecting varieties for next season. I don’t know when we will be able to harvest trials; but like most of you I hope we can get this important work done before much longer. These last rains will renew the process of field deterioration that will reduce yields and increase damage levels.

I am especially concerned that a lot of corn has been placed in bins and plastic “socks” in fields that contains more moisture than is preferable for long term storage. Personally, I can’t fault anyone for going ahead with the harvest; but special precautions must now be taken to avoid damage by heating and spoilage. Fans should be allowed to run continuously until the “drying front” moves through the entire mass of grain. This constant air movement will also head off spontaneous heating, the main cause of grain spoilage. Some drying will also be achieved as well; but significant progress in the removal of excess moisture can’t be expected until weather clears and relative humidity drops.

Levels of grain should be kept as shallow as possible to increase air flow rates per bushel; and peaked grain should be leveled since air will go around these deeper areas and allow them to generate heat and spoil. A good practice is to remove the cores from these peaked bins and place this grain in

the bottom of another bin, or better still transport it to a facility that can dry it. In situations where bins begin to develop heat, the best alternative may be to move grain from one bin to another, allowing the heat to be radiated; and restrictions to air movement such as pockets of trash will be broken up. As for grain stored in plastic tubes, these should be sealed as well as possible, any holes taped closed, to prevent the entry of oxygen that is needed for spontaneous heating. If oxygen is excluded, deterioration should essentially be stopped, although I'm still not completely comfortable with this method of storage for extended periods. Grain stored this way should be removed and shipped at the first opportunity.

We could go on about dealing with the handling of grain with too much moisture; but you can read more about this in several online pieces by typing "natural air drying of grain" into your internet search engine. I was impressed by a publication from the University of Georgia by Paul Summers; you can access it online at:

www.tifton.uga.edu/eng/Publications/Natural%20Air%20Drying.pdf

If you don't have access to the internet, call and I will print off some of them and provide them to you. This is not "rocket science"; but involves close monitoring of the grain for heating, odor, and the presence of apparent wetness on the surface of the grain. If you get in the bin and the grain holds you up without allowing your feet to sink a foot or more you need to do some close checking since the grain has "sweated" and will mold, seal over, and restrict air flow through the grain. When the air stops, problems start.

Soybeans:

Although notification of soybean rust finds in several south Delta counties was announced on Tuesday, September 9th, efforts have been ongoing to more thoroughly evaluate the situation. At this time, there is no recommendation for applying fungicides. The rust findings have so far been at low levels and/or isolated, and finds that were made several days ago in the southern part of the state have not shown significant further development. A fungicide application for rust now will likely be premature, and may have to be repeated if the disease does begin to spread. At the moment, it looks like we may escape the problem again. Everyone who owns a hand lens is looking; and you will be informed quickly if the situation changes. For now, just hold.

For the present, field deterioration has become a much bigger problem than rust, with some fields I have visited showing damage so severe that the beans may not be harvested. It seems that early Group 4 varieties have sustained the most damage since they were almost ready for harvest when the current wet period started. The primary problem is pod and stem rot (Phomopsis); but Cercospera, the disease which causes purple stain, is also contributing to the problem. Both problems can be found in most fields that could not be harvested on time. Chances are that you have already seen beans that look like this:



Phomopsis – "Pod and stem rot"



Cercospera – "Purple stain"

It is very discouraging to think about the severity of loss that may occur in some fields, given the costs associated with production, and the potential value of the crop. I cannot say without reservation that a “quality shot” of strobilurin fungicide would have prevented this; but so far the badly damaged fields I have visited did not receive the application. In the past, we have seen the late application of fungicide greatly reduce damage levels in soybeans. It’s certainly something to consider in fields that are now approaching maturity. This weather pattern may be over following hurricane Ike; but we don’t know that.

Insect activity has also increased in fields that are still actively growing, especially those planted after wheat. I have seen some of the highest stinkbug levels ever, and loopers are building in many fields. Insecticide applications have been made for both of these pests, and we should continue scouting fields. Stinkbugs have also contributed to seed damage problems by their feeding, and by providing entry for disease organisms.

Cotton:

Continued rains threaten to damage maturing cotton throughout the area. Older fields that have been opening for two weeks and more are especially at risk for boll rot and damage to yields and quality. Compounding this concern is the recent downward trend in prices. Normally, when we experience this kind of situation, the market counters with increased prices; but this year the trend seems to be backward. These conditions will add even more negative pressure to the future of cotton. Hopefully this trend will be short-lived, and we will begin to see things acting more “normal” soon.

I had been concerned all summer that my variety trials were planted too late to produce meaningful results this year; but it now appears that the later planted cotton may stand the best chance for good yields and quality. Early planted fields were loaded with green bolls during the height of the drought, and as a result entered cutout early. Later fields with fewer primary sinks (bolls) withstood the drought better, and were able to resume a semblance of normal growth when rains arrived. There is a gap in fruit retention in some of this cotton; but in general the fruit load is good and plants are filling bolls well now.

With continued rains and threats of another hurricane (Ike), I would actually like to see cotton go into full cutout and stop setting more squares. It’s time for this crop to look mature; but in most cases fields look like they should have in July. We may need to “encourage” some of this cotton to stop if this weather pattern continues.

Hill country fields have experienced relatively low insect numbers in recent weeks. Stinkbug levels have increased in proximity to maturing corn and soybean fields; but boll damage levels have not been excessive, with only a few areas requiring treatment in this area. I still know of area fields that have not been treated with any insecticide so far. I’ve had “second opinions” on some of them just for reassurance. The combination of good seed treatments that lessened the need for early applications, the absence of boll weevils, the presence of high levels of fire ants and other beneficials (especially in no-till fields), and the Widestrike and BG2 technologies have made this possible.

Wheat:

It’s time to start thinking toward the wheat crop. Production costs and declines in all the markets during the last few days have reduced interest in wheat; however reports indicate that price declines are tied to reduced speculative buying rather than by actual supply and demand forces. Although some of our wheat goes into feed grains, most of it is used for human consumption, and as such is hard-wired directly to the world food supply. We still have not overcome the decline in wheat supplies resulting from bad crops worldwide for several years; so someone has to grow wheat somewhere.

Costs of fertilizers, especially nitrogen, have threatened to reduce the profitability of all crops including wheat; and other costs for fuel, land, labor, seed, and equipment have contributed to the negative mix. However, I feel that by the time we should be planting wheat (after Nov. 10th or later) we will have more positive signals. Toward that end, we need to start outlining plans for wheat.

Variety selection is a difficult issue since we have a lot of very good varieties. Dr. Larson's Wheat Short List is available at: (<http://msucares.com/crops/wheat/index.html>). The short list contains several varieties that have proven themselves in the last two years, plus some new ones that are not as well known. There is a section for the northern portion of Mississippi and another for the south; and there are several reason for this. Try to avoid moving one of the varieties recommended for the south into the northern area unless it is listed for both areas. These lists take into consideration disease and insect interactions, maturity, cold tolerance, and other factors that may cause undesirable results if they are ignored.

Soils:

Next year's crop may be "crunch time" for soil nutrients since fertilizer prices may encourage some to reduce rates or skip applications altogether. Above all, soil testing is a must in order to put these expensive products where they are needed most. Combined with testing, variable rate application, targeted placement (banding near the drill), reduction in areas of proven low productivity can reduce the fertilizer bill. Liming is still the best investment where it is needed in order to maximize product utilization. Poultry litter and other organic by-products are even more valuable as the costs of commercial fertilizer has escalated.

The problem with organic products like poultry litter is that their actual content is variable. Virtually every load is different. Testing is valuable; but even then it's difficult to know their actual content. These materials should be used as a basis for improving fertility, to be supplemented with other fertilizer materials. This subject alone could take pages to cover; so call if you want to discuss it.

In Conclusion:

Just when we had gotten comfortable with this crop, we've been surprised by an extended season of bad weather. This is of course a reality in our profession. We go forward with optimism each year, and deal with these challenges as they appear. This one will be different because of the huge financial commitments that have been made, and the high value of commodities. A year that suggested an opportunity for good profits has become much more uncertain lately. It's time we stopped for a minute to ask for the blessing of good weather for the rest of our harvest. I believe most of us are about ready to admit that someone "above our pay grade" is in charge. No matter how sophisticated we get, this fact will not change. Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,



Ernest H. Flint, Ph.D., CCA
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