

CROPS

Braced for another season of extremes

By TOM J. BECHMAN

PLANTING delays were a fact of life across most of the Corn Belt this spring. If you planted all your corn on time, consider yourself fortunate.

For those not as lucky, Dave Nanda, consultant for Corn Illustrated plots sponsored by Farm Progress, adds a positive spin. "It's terrible for farmers; but as a researcher, this could be a year that helps set the boundaries of what's possible. When weather conditions are extreme, researchers see how products react under unusual conditions. Sometimes you learn more testing in these years."



What's normal?

Only problem is last year was also extreme, especially in the eastern Corn Belt. It was very dry and hot in spots. The latest 90-degree or higher reading was recorded in early October at Indianapolis.

Even Nanda might be wondering when that so-called "normal year" will appear. Thanks to the cool, wet start, it obviously won't be this year. Temperatures during the prime planting dates for May averaged below normal.

What's ahead is uncertain, but Elwynn Taylor, Iowa State University ag climatologist, believes the risk for drought is still up. There's a continuing moderate La Niña, plus the correlation between droughts in South Carolina one year and in the Midwest the next is strong.

What's known is that the critical period for corn will be stretched out. Corn planted last will likely reach the reproductive stage in late July or early August. Bob Nielsen at Purdue University and Peter Thomison at Ohio State University say late-planted hybrids shorten their maturity requirements by 200 growing degree days. But don't expect late-planted hybrids to catch up completely.

In '07, Nanda discovered that without irrigation, yields on "hot" ground, even planted timely, can be cut by half. Top yields in a nitrogen plot, with rates from zero to 250 pounds per acre, topped out at 90 bushels per acre. Yet with irrigation on similar ground, yields reached 245 bushels per acre.

Test the theory

This year tests the theory of how much delayed planting impacts yield. Agronomists Jim Herbek and Rick Hessin at the University of Kentucky, Princeton, say yield drop there begins during the first week of May. The Purdue University Corn & Soybean Field Guide indicates yields slip as early as May 5.

Based on the most recent data, 20% yield reductions could be possible for corn planted at the end of May. Instead of shooting for 300 bushels per acre in high-yield plots, Nanda could be stalking 240 bushels per acre. Ironically, that's the number he hit a year ago,

planting on time but with extreme heat and drought. "But don't count this year out yet," Nanda says. With a more temperate environment during pollination and timely rains, yields could still be excellent.



CRITICAL PERIOD AHEAD: Dave Nanda says the critical period for corn could be extended since planting was drawn out by weather delays.

