

# October wheat can stretch moisture

By J.T. SMITH

**E**SPECIALLY considering the severe moisture deficit of recent months in Texas and Oklahoma, there's little doubt sowing winter wheat in October can have advantages over seeding in September.

Travis Miller, associate department head, Texas A&M Soil and Crop Sciences, College Station, says research from Jackie Rudd and colleagues at the Texas A&M Experiment Station at Bushland clearly shows waiting until October to sow wheat can make a huge difference in stretching limited moisture in the soil.

The Texas Panhandle study near Amarillo showed that seeding on Sept. 1 compared with the first day of October used an additional 5 inches of water from the soil.

Average grain yields in the study were 15.6 bushels per acre from Sept. 1, some 39.9 bushels with October-sown wheat and 26.6 bushels from late planting.

## Key Points

- October-sown wheat is better for grain as well as forage.
- Sept. 1 wheat can use up limited moisture quickly.
- Nitrogen application can be delayed to winter or early spring.

**TRAVIS MILLER**, associate department head, Texas A&M Soil and Crop Sciences, College Station, says considerable research shows the advantages of October-sown wheat.



Of course, Miller realizes plenty of livestock producers will say they don't care about the grain anyway; they are growing wheat for its forage and thus planting at the beginning of September to get the early grazing for livestock.

That's where some may be mighty surprised by the Bushland study, which showed that not just grain, but also the most forage, was produced from October-sown wheat with some 8,049 pounds of total biomass per acre.

"So planting date does affect biomass, too," the veteran scientist notes. There's no doubt in Miller's mind that for most producers, certainly in Texas' wheat country, that October is — by far — the optimum time to sow wheat.

Nevertheless, he realizes the desperate situation livestock producers are in this year, and knows some go with September-sown wheat in hopes of getting early grazing to lessen their hay purchases. But if moisture already is depleted, that might be a bad trade-off.

"Every 1 inch of water we can get beyond that required getting the wheat to heading can mean an extra 5.7 bushels of wheat per acre," Miller emphasizes.

## Stretching expensive fertilizer

Gaylon Morgan, Texas A&M Extension state small-grains specialist at College Station, says with production inputs so costly, farmers are looking at ways to be efficient with things like fertilizer. As a general rule, he notes, 2 pounds of nitrogen are required for each bushel of wheat.

"But wheat requires very little ni-

**GAYLON MORGAN**, Texas A&M Extension state small-grains specialist at College Station, says nitrogen should be applied to wheat when it starts rapidly growing. This can save significant money.



trogen in the fall," Morgan emphasizes. "You can delay your N application until late winter or early spring. That's when the plant is really starting to grow; that's when wheat actually needs the nitrogen."

Morgan says his Oklahoma counterpart, Jeff Edwards, Oklahoma State University small-grains specialist in Stillwater, has done extensive research proving the value of both nitrogen strips and variable rates of N.

Knowing what N you already have in soil through soil tests and proper timing of N can make an enormous difference.

In fact, Edwards' OSU study in on-site fertility tests found the value of applying N correctly amounts to a savings of \$18 per acre.

Morgan says 7.3 million tons of N is applied annually in the United States — much of it wasted.

## Wheat prices positive, but land thirsts for rain

By J.T. SMITH

**I**F Texas and the Southwest can get moisture this fall, then you're likely to see wheat acreage increase. But that's a big "if," as the drought and relentless heat have gone on for so long. Soil moisture is greatly depleted.

Mark Waller, Extension grain marketing specialist, College Station, says U.S. acreage of wheat likely will increase, provided there is moisture,

for the 2006-07 winter wheat season. That's because wheat prices look attractive in the long term.

"Seven-dollar [per bushel] wheat?" Waller asks. "It's happened once before."

He wouldn't bet the farm on \$7 wheat. If wheat is above a \$5 local price this winter, and farmers can book some wheat for that, they might be wise to contract at least a portion of expected production.

"World wheat stocks are the lowest we've seen since the 1980s," Waller notes. "That's part of what's got the world excited [on wheat price momentum]."

Beyond the United States, extreme heat in France and other parts of Europe this year caused crops there to suffer greatly.

Nevertheless, Canada will remain a big issue, he adds, in how much Canadian grain eventually is exported into the United States. Conditions in Russia and Ukraine will be a big factor, too.

For Texas and the Southwest, it comes down to returning to average rainfall — and soon — which, subse-

quently, will mean a return to more normal wheat yields.

## Not likely to happen

They don't want to get run out of town as messengers with bad news, but a couple of weather experts say farmers can't count on big, general rains this fall.

Hector Guerrero, warning and coordination meteorologist, National Weather Service, San Angelo, Texas, says this year can only be characterized as severely dry — from the start of the year and into the fall months. He uses terms like "exceptional drought" and "extreme drought" to describe the worst drought in 50 years since 1956 — and many old-timers say the worst since 1936, which produced the hottest summer in Texas history. No matter if you go back 50 or 70 years, 2006 has been just awful.

Going into the end of August then September and the approach of fall, the Ketch-Byram Drought Index (for soil moisture deficit) showed 6 to 8 inches of rain would be needed just to get the soil-profile moisture back to where it's replenished.

Matt Groh, climate service specialist, NWS, San Angelo, says the long-range climate forecast issued for 90 days into fall shows temperatures continuing "above normal" and rain only about equal to normal and, in some areas, perhaps slightly above. That's not what farmers need.

If there's a dab of optimism, El Niño usually means wetter weather in Texas. Groh notes a warming trend has been observed in the Equatorial Pacific since May.

"We're watching that," Groh says. And hoping.



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