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Winter wheat revival

By HOLLY SPANGLER

COULD wheat be making a comeback in Illinois? Comeback may be too strong a word just yet, but wheat's immediate future certainly looks rosy.

"We've gotten along really, really well with wheat," says Astoria farmer Scott Dean, whose five-year wheat average is 85 bushels. "It should be a good cash crop next year, so long as we don't get a winterkill."

So good, in fact, that Dean's 2007 wheat may be more profitable than his soybeans — especially given that he's locked in wheat sales at \$4.67. If all goes as planned, he's looking at \$210- to \$245-per-acre wheat profits next year.

A comeback crop

Dean has stuck by wheat for the past several years, when many farmers abandoned the crop for more profitable corn and soybeans. He did so for one reason: to have a place to apply hog manure in the summer, when his time is less constrained. Over the years, he's consistently planted 50 to 60 acres.

During the past 10 years, Illinois farmers have cut wheat acres by 45%, as poor markets and diseases like scab combined to make wheat the ugly stepsister of Illinois commodities. Two years ago, profits hit rock bottom.

"We were seeing a lot of guys getting a check for \$1.60 and \$1.80 a bushel," says Mike Plumer, a Carbondale-based University of Illinois Extension educator. "With the dockages on scab, diseases and lighter test weights, you just couldn't make any money at all."

But not this year. Prices on the Board of Trade jumped by

Key Points

- Wheat acres could jump by 20% across southern Illinois.
- Better weather and markets boosted wheat profits this year.
- Illinois wheat acreage dropped by 45% over the past 10 years.

\$1 or more. A cool, dry spring and a dry June bumped yields in many areas by 10 to 15 bushels. Plumer reports yields of near 100 bushels at their Mt. Vernon demonstration plots, and farmers like Todd Wachtel describe the same.

"Wheat will most likely be our best crop this year," says Wachtel, who farms with his father, uncle and grandfather near Altamont. His family's 500 acres of wheat averaged 93 bushels per acre in 2006. At \$4 a bushel, plus 28 cents for seed wheat, that's real profit — not to mention an additional boost from double-crop soybeans.

Not surprisingly, the Wachtels plan to increase wheat acres by 20% this fall, and they expect many of their neighbors to do the same.

Big turnaround

Plumer estimates that wheat acreage across southern Illinois could jump by 20% for 2007. Further north, the increases may be more subtle; however, Plumer has taken questions from farmers as far north as Bureau County who are considering wheat.

"We'll have to see if this is a blip, or whether this is a start to taking us up to the normal acreage we used to have planted to wheat," Plumer adds. "The markets will determine that. If prices stay up and the weather pattern holds for a drier spring and June, that's conducive to raising wheat."



FAITHFUL TO WHEAT: For years, Astoria farmer Scott Dean has consistently sowed 50 to 60 acres of wheat as part of his hog manure management plan. This year, the bullish wheat market may tempt him to plant more. Read more about the cash crop's comeback on Page 6.

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