

2010 Arkansas Wheat Crop Smallest Since 1960s

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Arkansas' wheat crop this year is the smallest since the 1960s, the result of bad weather, lower prices for grain, and high input costs.

About 200,000 acres of wheat were planted this year, down from 400,000 acres last year and 1 million acres the year before that.

"That's a big decline," said Jason Kelley, extension agronomist, wheat and feed grains, for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. "It's been a long time since we've had acreage that low.

"A big reason is that we didn't have a big opportunity to plant this past fall," he said. "The summer crops – the soybeans, the rice, the corn, all those crops – were harvested late, and wheat is going to follow one of those crops, so if those crops are delayed that delays wheat planting."

Wheat, usually planted in October, couldn't be planted in most places until November because of wet fields. And once it was in the ground, there was even more rain and the weather turned cold.

"We really didn't have a lot of growth last fall, not much growth this winter, and it seems like this winter has just kind of dragged on and on and the wheat has been slow to green up, slow to start growing," Kelley said. "There are some fields we planted in November that got big rains on them and we just don't have very good stands, so there's some concerns that the wheat yields just won't be as good this year as in some other years."

When 1 million acres of wheat were planted two years ago, weather was right for the planting season and producers were looking at record prices.

Since then, however, the grain prices have fallen.

"We came off historic prices – \$7, \$8, \$9 a bushel and we're looking at probably \$4.50 to \$5 now," said Kelley. "The price has been cut in half and at the same time, the input price has

not been cut in half, so there's really three factors that have reduced the acreage – weather, lower grain prices, and high input prices."

In 1981, a record 2 million acres of wheat were planted in Arkansas.

"I think everything went right that year," he said. "I think we had a fall when we had ample opportunity to plant and had a lot of interest in wheat, and when the planting got started the prices started jumping up."

The most recent cold snap, when snow fell on parts of the state and temperatures dipped near freezing around March 20 and 21, won't do any damage to the wheat crop, but will likely slow growth put the crop that much further behind schedule, Kelley said.

In 2007, a warm January, February and March were followed by a big freeze around Easter, the first week of April.

"That year the wheat crop was much more advanced than it is right now, so we had a freeze that really decimated the crop," he said. "Right now the crop is two to three weeks behind where it was that particular year. Ultimately the crop is not far enough along that the recent cold temperatures are not going to hurt it. The one concern that wheat producers usually have is a late freeze – once wheat gets close to heading out. That's what happened in 2007. We're a long ways from wheat heading out, so I guess the freeze is not on the radar yet."

That said, it's impossible to know what the harvest in late May or early June will bring.

"Wheat's a funny crop," according to Kelley. "It looks terrible all winter or it doesn't look like it's going to do as much, but then spring comes and it starts growing and it looks better, so it's really hard to say what the yield potential really is. But we really need to get some cooperation from Mother Nature because the wheat crop is behind in growth now compared to where it should be at this time of year."

For more information on Arkansas' wheat crops, contact your county extension office, or visit www.aragriculture.org/wheat.htm. Δ



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