

# A Good Wheat Crop Needed For Farmers And Consumers

PRINCETON, KY.

**W**ith wheat prices setting records, farmers hope 2008 will not be a repeat of 2007 when a disastrous late spring freeze left their once promising wheat crop with little or no hope.

A good wheat crop not only will be a relief to farmers, but it is also important to consumers, as wheat is in short supply prompting higher prices at the store.

So far this year's crop is well within range of being a very good crop, said Jim Herbek, extension grains specialist with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture and UK Wheat Science Group member. Consistent wet weather has made it difficult for most producers to apply nitrogen to their fields, but there's still time to get that done.

The March supply/demand report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows U.S. wheat supplies to be tighter than it previously reported based on higher projected food use and exports. The USDA report lists ending stocks (wheat on hand) at the end of the 2007/2008 marketing year to be the lowest since 1946-47. Global wheat stocks are at a 30-year low, according to the report.

These tight supplies, coupled with high fuel costs, mean higher prices for consumers. The February USDA food price outlook for 2008 projects all food to increase by 3 to 4 percent as retailers pass on higher commodity and energy costs to consumers. Cereal and bakery products increased 1 percent from December 2007 to January 2008, with flour prices surging 6.5 percent. Overall, bakery products and cereal prices

are up 5.7 percent from last year as higher wheat, corn and energy prices have pushed production costs for these products higher in the past months, according to the USDA report.

Wheat producers in Kentucky have a different weather scenario going into this spring than they did in 2007. Last year's wheat crop was well ahead in growth compared to normal because of a warm February and March, which helped set the stage for the high levels of freeze damage. This year's crop is closer to normal in terms of growth and development, lessening the likelihood of freeze damage.

Thanks to timely planting, the majority of this year's crop got off to a good start last fall and sustained little winter damage. Some damage may have occurred in late-planted or shallow-planted fields due to plant heaving.

The big concern for farmers now is getting nitrogen on their crop. Persistently wet weather is making applications difficult.

"At this point there's still opportunity for a good crop, but we need to get nitrogen on as soon as field conditions allow," Herbek said.

Generally, UK recommends applying the needed nitrogen in two applications. However, for farmers unable to do so because of the wet conditions, they can apply all the nitrogen at one time up until the plant begins to joint and still see good yields. There's at least two more weeks for optimum benefit, he said.

"Saturated soils are not to the point of having a detrimental effect on the crop," Herbek said. "But the crop is in need of a string of warm, dry days." △