

Arkansas Wheat Crop: It's All About The Money

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

What a difference a year makes. A year ago, wheat prices were booming, so Arkansas farmers planted a million acres. This fall, wheat prices have fallen, and farmers planted an estimated 350,000 acres.

"When our producers were making planting decisions in late summer and early fall, grain prices were falling and input costs were high," said Dr. Jason Kelley, extension wheat and small grains specialist with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

Producers were also faced with a high basis – the difference between the Chicago Board of Trade price and what local grain elevators were willing to pay.

Farmers also based their planting decisions on whether they rented or owned their own land. Their rental costs and their landlord's recommendations about planting also played a part in the final decision.

Later planted wheat is just coming up, Kelley said, but some wheat has been in the ground for two months. "Not much wheat is in the growing phase now, but it's about where it needs to be for this time of year," he said. "What's growing looks pretty good."

Kelley said when winter wheat is harvested in the early summer, the money will provide farmers with much needed income to pay for the expense of planting other crops.

Farmers' biggest concern at this time of year is ryegrass control. Controlling the weed is an added expense. Hoelon has been the herbicide of choice to control ryegrass, but in recent years, ryegrass has begun developing resistance to Hoelon, Kelley said.

"Now, every county has some resistant ryegrass. Alternative herbicides are available, but there are concerns that they may also become ineffective eventually," the extension specialist said.

Meanwhile, Kelley said the extension service is fortunate to have two veteran county extension agents, Steve Kelley from Desha County and Chris Grimes from Mississippi County to take over duties as coordinators for the Wheat Research Verification Program.

The program demonstrates to farmers that U of A research-based, extension recommendations can help farmers increase their yields while typically reducing inputs.

County agents and extension specialists visit the farms of participating farmers once a week to monitor their crops and make recommendations. Recommendations include: variety to plant, planting date, weed control and fertility. It's important that these recommendations be applied in a timely manner, according to Jason Kelley.

County agents are also available by telephone to answer farmers' questions between visits.

The extension service sponsors field tours of participating farms for other farmers to see how well the university recommendations work.

Twelve farmers spread across the Delta, southwest Arkansas and the Arkansas River Valley participated this year, Kelley said.

"The program has been so successful over the 20 plus years it has been in existence that participants have averaged about 13 bushels an acre over the statewide average yield," he said.

△