

Burning Crop Stubble Declines As Conservation Tillage Takes Hold In Ark.

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Some farmers burn wheat straw left in the field after harvest, but what was once a common practice has declined in Arkansas in recent years, according to Dr. Jason Kelley, extension wheat and feed grains specialist with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

"The planting equipment has improved, and the leftover residue doesn't pose as much of a problem for farmers as it used to. Planting equipment can drill into the stubble," Kelley said.

Kelley said more farmers are using conservation tillage in which they plant directly into the stubble of the previous year's crop. Conservation tillage allows farmers to save labor and time incurred by tillage. It also has been shown to conserve soil moisture and help prevent erosion.

"Another factor is that people are farming more acres, and they don't have as much time to till the ground and plant," Kelley said.

Burning the stubble of old crops was a convenience for farmers, but not everyone liked the practice. Utility companies were concerned about their poles being burned, and the smoke could be a problem for highway traffic.

Hank Chaney, Prairie County extension agent, said "there's always a risk with the smoke and potential for an accident on a nearby highway."

In Prairie County, he said, a lot of farmers plant wheat on raised beds and then plant double-crop soybeans no-till after wheat harvest. Planting no-till saves several tillage operations and conserves moisture in June when rainfall may be getting limited, which helps ensure better soybean stands.

Some farmers still burn to get rid of herbicide-resistant marestail weed, Chaney said.

Randy Chlapecka, Jackson County extension agent, said burning wheat stubble is a practice that has been going on as long as farmers have been growing wheat. "There's still a fair amount going on, but there's less of it every year.

"More and more farmers are switching to conservation tillage and acquiring the necessary equipment as they see their neighbors using it and benefitting," Chlapecka said.

"They can plant right into wheat residue and conserve moisture. The capacity of the soil to hold moisture is greatly improved by leaving the stubble," he said. "Moisture is so important to soybeans. Farmers can save on irrigation costs."

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