Dry Weather May Have Caused Some Cornstalk Deterioration

LEXINGTON, KY.

Farmers should examine the condition of their cornstalks because this summer's dry weather may have caused them to deteriorate in strength, said Chad Lee, grain crops extension specialist with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.

During the month of August, parts of the state, including Lexington, did not receive any rain for three weeks, said Keys Arnold, UK agricultural meteorologist. While the state as a whole had above average rainfall totals for July, north-central and far western areas of the state were dryer than normal. The U.S. Drought Monitor, which was released last Thursday, still indicates 89 percent of the state is abnormally dry.

These dry conditions caused the crops to stop growing and taking in nutrients. However, the seeds were still developing when the dry weather set in. With no other source of nutrients, the seeds may have started pulling nutrients from the stalks in order to finish their development.

While this summer's dry weather is not as severe as last year's drought, stalk deterioration is more of a concern this year than last year. The 2007 drought was so intense and prolonged that the crops did not develop as well as they have this year.

"This year, we have much taller plants, better ear development and better seed fill," Lee said. "The ears are taking on more weight this year, and the condition of the stalks is a real concern."

The corn crop still looks very good overall, he added. Some producers in far western Kentucky have already begun their harvest, but for the majority of the state, harvest is still a week or two away.

If the state were to get heavy rain or strong winds during this time, the weak stalks could fall over in the field, which could make harvest difficult and possibly cause crop loss. Arnold said both the 30-day and 90-day extended forecasts for Kentucky call for an average amount of rainfall, some of which could be from the remnants of tropical storms or hurricanes.

To check for stalk deterioration, farmers should walk their fields. They will need to grab a stalk at chest height, pull the plant toward them until it is at an angle and let go. If the stalk snaps back and stands up, it is strong. It's weak if it falls over. If farmers find weak stalks in their fields, they will want to weigh their options and consider harvesting the crop early.

If the crop is harvested early, it will likely not have completed the drying process.

"Usually farmers harvest when the seeds are at 14 to 15 percent moisture, but this year they may want to harvest at 18 percent and dry it out after harvest if the stalks are weak," Lee said.

He said this is a scenario most producers want to avoid, because drying the seeds after harvest means that they will have additional energy expenses. However, it may be the best choice. Δ