

Heavy Spring Rains Lowered Wheat Yields

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MISS.

Wheat growers in Mississippi watched what was a very good crop in early spring turn into a major disappointment by harvest.

About 75 percent of the state's 230,000 wheat acres were harvested by mid-June. Some of the remaining acres will never be harvested, as they are flooded by Yazoo River backwater.

Erick Larson, grain crops agronomist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, said the crop was doing well through February until heavy rains started in mid-March and continued through April and May.

"This heavy rainfall and saturated soils reduced our grain yield and grain quality substantially," Larson said.

Cooler-than-normal weather conditions in March and April delayed wheat's maturity, but the low temperatures would not have significantly impacted final yield were it not for the excessive rains that came later.

"It really stunted the crop except on soils with really good drainage. Most wheat is in the Delta, and that is flat land that doesn't drain well," Larson said. "So not only are the farmers not having high yields, but many are getting docked for quality."

The state had 520,000 acres of wheat last year, and Larson said producers planted just half that this year, primarily in response to high nitrogen prices at planting season. Nitrogen, which is derived from fossil fuels, is a major input for wheat production.

"Nitrogen prices fell in November, but the optimal wheat planting window is mid-October to early November," Larson said. "By the time prices fell considerably, farmers had already

made their decisions, and many chose not to plant wheat."

Jerry Singleton, Extension area agronomic crops agent, said the quality of the wheat crop in the Leflore County area varies widely.

"We have some poor yields, some average yields and no excellent yields," Singleton said. "Test weights are running from 38 to 58 pounds per bushel. You hope for 60 pound test weight."

Singleton said how well a particular wheat field is faring depends entirely on how well the field drains.

"The poorer the drainage, the poorer the yields and test weights," he said. "Wheat doesn't always go on our best soils, where we plant cotton and corn."

With wheat still being harvested, farmers are trying to decide whether to plant double-cropped soybeans or do nothing with the fields this summer. Singleton said some are deciding to plant beans behind the wheat.

"Planting non-irrigated beans is very risky," he said, and added, "We just got dry enough last week to finish planting or replanting our normal beans."

John Michael Riley, Extension agricultural economist, said wheat prices increased along with other commodities in May as a result of a weaker U.S. dollar and a general strength in grain prices.

"Additional help for wheat resulted from adverse weather in April that hampered the crop in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles," Riley said. "The crop looks good in major wheat-growing states, so prices stopped rising."

Wheat's projected marketing year average price is \$4.90 to \$5.90 per bushel. The current July futures contract price is \$5.96 a bushel. Δ