

Louisiana Wheat Acreage Expected To Increase

BATON ROUGE, LA.

With substantially increased prices for wheat, Louisiana farmers are expected to plant a lot more of that commodity this fall.

"I've gotten tons of calls," said LSU AgCenter small grains breeder Steve Harrison, commenting on an unusual number of inquiries he's received about wheat.

Wheat prices have increased for two reasons, said LSU AgCenter economist Kurt Guidry. First, the wheat crop in Russia and Eastern Europe was poor this year because of a severe drought, causing Russia to ban exports. Then market speculation added to the price that jumped to \$7 per bushel from \$4.50 just a few weeks ago.

"I do think the prices we have seen are driven beyond what the supply and demand would suggest," Guidry said.

Guidry said prices in 2007-08 increased sharply, but ending inventories then were around 600 million bushels, compared to the projected ending stocks of almost 1 billion bushels this year.

How long will prices stay at the current level? Guidry said a dramatic wheat acreage increase this fall could lower prices considerably. If he were to consider planting a wheat crop, "I would try to lock in some of these prices on at least some of my production," Guidry said.

Seed will be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, Harrison said. "Seed is absolutely locked up and gone."

Bad planting conditions last fall and decreased wheat acreage resulted in less seed being available this year, he said. "This year we've got triple the demand for seed."

Getting a stand established is the most difficult part of growing wheat in Louisiana. A wet October sets up a bad start for the crop, Harrison said.

Louisiana wheat acreage could easily double from last year's total of 150,000 acres, which was a 60,000-acre decrease from 2008, he said.

As a breeder, Harrison has developed several wheat varieties suitable for Gulf Coast growing conditions. One of those, AGS2060, has excelled. "It's has a real high test weight, and it's Hessian fly-resistant and early-maturing."

Harrison said yield potential in Louisiana is comparable to the Midwestern states.

"It's probably even better, but there are pitfalls in the way too," he said. "I've seen 100-bushel

yields in Louisiana."

Selecting the right wheat variety is important, said Ed Twidwell, LSU AgCenter wheat specialist. Farmers should be wary of planting varieties developed for areas other than the Gulf Coast because they can be more disease- and insect-susceptible.

"Typically, we have a lot of wet weather and disease," Twidwell said. Planting early can subject wheat to more disease and insect pressure.

Even though farmers are eager to take advantage of favorable prices, early planting is not a good idea, he said. The LSU AgCenter recommendation is for Oct. 15 to Nov. 15 in north Louisiana and Nov. 1 to Nov. 30 in central and south Louisiana.

Waiting until after the recommended window for planting increases the chances for stand loss and reduced tillering, however.

Twidwell and Harrison have developed a set of guidelines for growing wheat. Among their recommendations are:

- Seeding rates should be increased for planting late and into cold, wet soil. A grain drill is recommended with a seeding rate of 60-75 pounds per acre, and that should be increased to 75-120 pounds for broadcast planting, late planting or planting into a poorly prepared seedbed.

- Fall fertilization and liming should be carried out to supply any needs indicated by soil testing. Phosphorus and potassium, where recommended, should be incorporated into the seedbed before planting. If lime is recommended, apply it before seedbed preparation if possible. Fall application of nitrogen usually is not needed where wheat follows soybeans. Where wheat follows corn, sorghum or rice, application of 15 to 20 pounds of nitrogen per acre may be beneficial.

- A low test weight can result in a price reduction at the elevator. Test weight is influenced by weather conditions following grain dry-down, and prompt harvest is important. Test weight is strongly influenced by genetics, and varieties with low average test weights in LSU AgCenter trials are likely to have low test weights in most environments.

To spread out their risks, growers should look at the two-year data tables and select several different wheat varieties to plant this fall, the expert said. It's not a good idea to plant all of their acreage with a single variety. △



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