

Nafziger Offers Wheat Seeding Tips

URBANA, ILL.

It shouldn't be difficult to get wheat seeded this fall in most of Illinois, said Emerson Nafziger, University of Illinois Extension agronomist.

He said the best time to plant wheat ranges from just past mid-September in the northern edge of Illinois to just before mid-October at the southern tip. In the major growing area of southwestern Illinois, wheat should be planted the second week of October. Planting a few days before or after that is not of concern, but planting 10 days to two (or more) weeks early is not the best practice.

"Harvest has started very slowly in northern Illinois, however, so getting wheat planted on time there will be a challenge unless it can follow something other than corn for grain or soybean," Nafziger said. "Planting a week or two late usually doesn't produce a big yield penalty, but it can lower yields in years when cold weather comes early."

In fall 2010, the wheat crop was planted on time but got off to a slow start due to very dry soils at planting. This may occur again this year, as some areas continue to be very dry, he said. While wheat seed does not need to take up much water to germinate, it needs some. There may be enough water present in soils following harvest, but Nafziger said growers need to be careful to get the seed placed so it can take up what water is there.

"No-till can help, but not if the soil is powder-dry at the depth of seed placement," he said.

"It's a little risky, but if there is more soil moisture several inches deep than at the surface, some tillage might help bring up enough to allow the seed to germinate."

Make sure the seed is placed uniformly deep and that the planting process produces good seed-soil contact. This can be more difficult in cornstalks than in soybean residue, but either can work as a preceding crop, he said.

Wheat seeding rate trials in recent years have shown that seeding rates should be between 30 and 40 seeds per square foot. The higher number may be appropriate for later planting or when planting into very dry soils, where emergence might be late. Late emergence usually lowers tiller number per plant, so more plants can help bring shoot numbers up, Nafziger said.

Some have been questioning the possibility of planting wheat in 15-inch rows using a split-row planter. At Ohio State University, researchers have conducted wheat variety trials at both spacing. They grow much of their wheat farther north and sometimes plant soybeans as a relay crop between wheat rows during wheat growth, he said.

"I consider 15-inch wheat rows to be roughly equivalent to 40-inch corn rows," Nafziger said. "That means that we can often get good yields, but under the best conditions we will not maximize yields in the wider rows. I would exhaust every possibility for getting a wheat drill to use before I would consider modifying a set of vacuum plates to use to plant wheat. Δ