Soggy Weather Slows State's Harvest

LEXINGTON, KY.

Harvesting this year's crop is an uphill battle for the state's corn and soybean producers as frequent, heavy rains are keeping combines out of the fields for days at a time.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Weekly Weather and Crop Bulletin, 46 percent of Kentucky's corn crop was harvested as of Oct. 11. This is well behind the five-year average of 81 percent. The report said 18 percent of state's soybeans were harvested on Oct. 11, which is also behind the five-year average of 34 percent.

University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension agents across the state are reporting harvesting delays with estimates of 40 to 65 percent of the corn crop harvested in their respective counties.

"We had a lot of harvesting activity at the end of August and first of September, but we've only had two spurts since then where we could run the combines for multiple days," said Jay Stone, extension agent for agricultural and natural resources in Christian County.

Daviess County Agricultural and Natural Resources Agent Clint Hardy said, since the middle of September, growers there have averaged about 2.5 days of harvesting per week and have 15 to 30 harvesting days still to go.

In the past 30 days, parts of central and west Kentucky received between 6 and 12 inches of rain and, depending on the location, are 3 to 8 inches above normal. Areas in eastern Kentucky had between 2 and 9 inches of rainfall and are 1 to 5 inches above normal, said Michael Mathews, staff meteorologist in the UK College of Agriculture.

"What we really need is two to three weeks of sunny weather with temperatures in the 60s and 70s, but at this time of year, that's unlikely to happen," said Chad Lee, UK grain crops specialist.

The wet weather has forced producers to harvest wherever they can, whether the field has corn or soybeans. Many are frequently switching between the two crops, resulting in additional down time from constantly changing the settings on their combines. Rain-soaked fields have made it very difficult for some types of hauling equipment, like semis, to navigate the fields. Instead of conveniently parking them at the edge of a field, producers are parking semis at the end of a road near the field and traveling farther to load their crop.

"It's a tough crop to get out because of logistics," said Sam McNeill, UK agricultural engineer. "Producers may want to try to get another grain cart if they can just to keep the combines running."

The wet weather, coupled with cool temperatures is not conducive for drying grain in the field. UK specialists are encouraging producers to harvest at a higher-than-normal moisture level and find a way to dry the grain – either at the farm or at the elevator.

"The longer it's out in the field, the more likely it will develop grain quality problems, weak stalks or seed quality damage," said Jim Herbek, UK grain crops specialist.

While many growers have grain bins, they usually do not have enough to store and dry their entire crop on their farm.

"Many growers harvest and dry a portion of their crop in a normal year; rarely do they have to dry it all, like some may do this year," Lee said.

Many may have to move or sell dry grain in the bins or take the wet grain to an elevator and receive a moisture dock in price. The amount of the price decrease varies depending on the moisture level and if crop has other grain quality issues.

Growers harvesting corn with moisture levels in the low- to mid-20s and selling directly to the elevators are seeing price decreases from 20 to 60 cents a bushel in Daviess County, Hardy said.

In addition to making fields soggy, the wet weather has led to an increase in stalk, ear and kernel rots. Diplodia ear rot, Kentucky's most common ear rot, is present in fields more than normal this year, said Paul Vincelli, UK extension plant pathologist.

Fortunately for producers, while Diplodia ear rot can lead to moldy grain, it is not known to produce mycotoxins in the United States.

The drying process keeps fungi from being active, reducing the spread of mold. However, growers need to closely monitor their bins for mustiness and watch for hot pockets or wet spots. Both promote mold growth. If possible, growers should try to separate mold damaged grain from the rest of the crop.

"Although Diplodia is not considered a mycotoxin risk, grain damaged by Diplodia ear rot may be more susceptible to mycotoxin-producing fungi already present in the bins that can grow at lower moistures," Vincelli said.

Fortunately for farmers, the state is expected to be warmer and dryer between Oct. 18 and 22, which will allow them to make some progress, Mathews said. However, growers need to let the wet ground firm up before returning to the harvest, which could take a few days of dry weather.

While it is a soggy harvest, the wet weather throughout the summer has led to phenomenal yields and record-breaking production. The USDA predicts the state's largest-ever corn and soybean crop this year. Forecasters predict Kentucky corn production will reach 177.4 million bushels, and soybeans will reach an estimated 62 million bushels. The same report estimates corn yields of 157 bushels per acre and soybean yields of 44 bushels per acre, which ties with the record yields of 2004 and 2006.

More information is available in ID-139, A Comprehensive Guide to Corn Management in Kentucky. It is accessible through county extension offices and online at http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id139/id139.htm. Δ