

Thinking Toward The 2012 Crop Year

DR. EMERSON NAFZIGER



URBANA, ILL.

For many, but certainly not all, Illinois farmers, 2011 has been a trying year, with yields coming in less than hoped and expected. Here are a variety of thoughts as we head into the cold season, looking forward to better crops in 2012:

- On the (modestly) bright side, though the 2011 weather stress was severe, we did get a crop. Thirty years ago such weather would have damaged yield much more. That's because breeding works – it has given us crops that grow better and tolerate stress somewhat better than they once did. Take a look at University of Illinois variety testing data if you haven't yet. You'll find results from a range of sites that represent both stress and good conditions. As always, look for both high yields and consistency when buying seed, with the emphasis on consistency for the fields with average or below-average yield potential.

- Rainfall from July through October across central Illinois totaled 6 to 10 inches, which is 4 to 10 inches below normal, leaving soils dried out over much of the region. At least half of the rain came after September 1, by which time the corn crop had more or less stopped taking up water, and use by the soybean crop was declining. When there's no crop and temperatures turn cool, most of the precipitation we get stays in the soil. Normal rainfall from November through March ranges from 10 to 18 inches as we go from northwestern to southeastern Illinois. So if we get close to normal rain and snow over the next five months, soils should be fully recharged as we come into the spring. Still, it could be late winter until we see tile lines running again in some areas, and a dry winter could leave some fields short by spring.

- We'll be talking more about the widespread yield problems with continuous corn in 2011, including at the Corn & Soybean Classics. But one question that is relevant now is whether part of the problem came from the amount of fall tillage we did in corn stalks in fall 2010, combined with applying ammonia under dry soil conditions last fall (sometimes preceded and followed by tillage) and then driving on these soils when they were still wet underneath to till and plant this past spring. Soil management was certainly not the only issue, but at least keep in mind that breaking down soils with tillage in the fall almost to the point that they're ready to plant might not be that helpful come spring. It's appropriate to till this fall to break up compaction again in many fields, but always ask yourself if a second fall trip is necessary.

- Dry conditions in the second half of the season usually result in less nitrogen uptake by the crop and in accumulation of some nitrogen in the form of nitrate in the upper soil layers. If we get normal precipitation through spring, much of this nitrate will move down, and some will exit through tile. But where soils are dry now, where corn yields this year were lower than normal, and where corn this year will be followed with corn next year, you might want to take soil samples before applying N next spring to see if nitrate-N has carried over. Normally both the top foot and the second foot are sampled for this, and then an average amount of N per acre is calculated; adjust next year's rates if there's an appreciable amount carried over.

- With corn seed production hit hard in some areas, there is talk about possible shortages, at least of some hybrids, next year. There are also reports that some winter production in South America was planted late, so seed could be late arriving next spring. Seed companies will do their usual good job getting seed out when it's needed, but corn seed could arrive "just in time" more than usual next spring, and some may need to decide between taking seed of available hybrids early or waiting for seed of preferred hybrids.

Soybean yields are not as high across Illinois as they were in 2011 – average yield is now projected at 46 bushels per acre, down from last year's Illinois record of 51.5. But yields are very high again in some areas, especially northwestern Illinois. I've heard of a few cases where the second year of low continuous corn yields has a farmer considering putting soybeans back into some fields next year after a number of years in continuous corn. Having corn prices more than half the price of soybean per bushel still favors corn at the moment, and it's not unreasonable to hope for better yields of corn following corn in 2012 than some of us had this year. But soybeans in a field following five or more years of corn typically yield somewhat better than soybeans in a corn-soybean rotation. If corn has been in the field for five years or more, be sure to get soybean seed inoculated.

A quick look at some of our data on corn plant populations reconfirms that, as would be expected, stress conditions are not conducive to raising responses to population increases to high levels. But high populations did not produce many of the disastrous yield losses like some producers saw last year. So you might consider raising populations if they're still not high enough, but don't figure on increasing them much past the mid- to upper-30,000 range. Δ

DR. EMERSON NAFZIGER: Professor, Department of Crop Science, University of Illinois



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