

Water Wisdom

Farmers Fine Tune Irrigation, Reap The Benefits In High Yields

BETTY VALLE GEGG-NAEGER

MidAmerica Farmer Grower

PORTAGEVILLE, MO.

Farmers in Missouri are becoming better and better irrigators, according to Dr. Joe Henggeler, University of Missouri Extension irrigation specialist. About 80 percent of irrigation in Missouri is done in the Bootheel.

Corn farmers account for most of the irrigation, then cotton, with soybean farmers falling to third.

"Part of the thing with soybeans is it's often grown in land that sometimes they can't farm because of the water table," he said. "So if you invest in an irrigation system and you can't farm it, the investment is a bit of a waste."

Center pivot and flood systems make up most of the irrigation here, with a few trying the drip system. However flood and center pivot make up most of the systems.

"From our surveys, it's something like a 5 percent increase in irrigation each year in the Bootheel,"

Henggeler said. "In the rest of Missouri there is probably actually some decrease in irrigation because of the water table situations; it's so

With irrigation increasing around 5 percent each year, Dr. Joe Henggeler, University of Missouri Extension Irrigation Specialist says farmers in Missouri are becoming better irrigators.

Photo by John LaRose, Jr.



deep and pumping now is so expensive. So I don't think there is a lot of growth in the other regions like central and southwest Missouri."

In his 12 years as irrigation specialist, he has worked to present an irrigation conference each year, although icy weather cancelled it two of those years. There was no irrigation specialist in this area before his arrival, although some county specialists did some work in that area. The trend toward irrigation and the understanding of how best to use it is providing ben-

efits that are readily seen.

"We look at the survey data and the dryland yield is a good barometer for how effective irrigation is," he said. "We're seeing greater separation on the irrigated yields so that means the knowledge is increasing, especially in soybeans. When I got here 42 bushels was the average irrigated yield, and now we get people reporting 70/80 bushels. So it has really jumped. Corn also has increased somewhat. I think overall we see a lot more people reporting 200 bushel corn yields. Earlier we didn't really see too many."

Water is a necessity if farmers want the yields to increase.

"If you want to get the 200 bushel corn, you're going to need the water in most years," Henggeler said.

Cotton in southeast Missouri is basically irrigated also.

"I don't know what the percentage is. I would say maybe 60/65 percent is irrigated."

Irrigation is increasing more and more every year in all crops.

One aid that came out at the conference this year is the use of telemetry to know the moisture availability for the crops.

"We can put sensors in the ground to measure so much and we've done that for years," he said. "But it has been a hassle as you have to go get the data, record it, and graph it. But with telemetry or a wireless system the information is sent directly to either the farmer's computer or the internet, where farmers can access it. Then they can see the curve. They can even get emails sent to them, informing them that the moisture has reached a certain level."

This information can be used to time irrigation as well as to determine the right time to plant.

"One of our speakers today, AquaSpy, makes one of these systems and it's the one that is used by the seed companies," Henggeler said. "They work with two local people, one in Tennessee and one in Missouri,

both of whom say it has really helped them a bunch."

They learned a lot about their mistakes when they previously irrigated, whether it was not putting enough water on, or not coming back frequently enough with additional moisture.

"It has really helped them and apparently it's helped their bottom line too" he summed. Δ

BETTY VALLE GEGG-NAEGER: Senior Staff Writer, MidAmerica Farmer Grower



Link Directly To: **RICETEC**