

Field Notes: April 27, 2008

Weather continues to delay planting.

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The period of warm and clear weather we enjoyed last week allowed area farmers to evaluate stands of corn damaged by cool and wet conditions, and by the freeze we experienced on April 15th. Decisions about stands of corn have been difficult; but the result has been the largest corn replant we have had in years. At this time I expect that as much as 25 percent of the committed corn acreage will be replanted, and this number may increase.

Normally, we assume that corn can stand the effects of frost; however this year's conditions were complicated by the fact that stands were already being challenged by cool and wet field conditions. The results of this complex situation has been very difficult to deal with since in most cases large portions of fields survived reasonably well while in other portions stands dropped to population levels below 10,000 plants per acre.

While there is no "textbook" answer for what plant population level is acceptable, the general consensus seems to be that large field areas that have been reduced below levels of 16,000 to 18,000 plants per acre justify replanting. Other factors are of course involved. These include the fact that soil moisture continues to be adequate for planting, and seed companies are willing to supply producers with much of the required seed.

No farmer likes to begin a crop with too few plants to produce the yield his soil can potentially produce. Going forward with a poor stand is like running a race after being told to give everyone else a ten second advantage. You may feel that you can finish; but you also know you are probably going to lose.

The reaction to the corn stand question has been varied. Some chose to replant almost everything without a lot of debate, while others have only replanted the problem areas. Some have chosen to live with marginal stands that may or may not improve. We can't know which choice has been best until harvest.

Compounding the dilemma, rain has returned for another visit this weekend, further delaying the replant and setting back efforts to begin planting soybeans and cotton. Following this rain which has delivered another two inches or more over most of the area we will likely experience another cool period, which is exactly what we do not need.

My evaluation of wheat fields to date has suggested that most of the area escaped damage; however I feel there will be a scattering of damaged wheat in some the lowest "frost pockets". There may also be differences revealed among varieties with regard to cold tolerance that we can't fully evaluate until harvest.

Many factors are being discussed in connection with the problems we have seen this year; however I continue to believe that drainage has been a major factor. Wet fields combined with cool temperatures to produce very poor conditions for emergence. Then when the freeze arrived, it pushed many already stressed plants beyond the point of no return. Saturated soils also failed to warm up as quickly as well drained soils, adding to the stress on emergence. Varietal differences have also played a role, as have issues with seed size, seedling vigor, and other things. All these issues have combined to produce one of the most challenging planting seasons any of us can remember.

The statement that I continue to hear from optimistic producers is "a bad start often leads to a good finish". This seems like an "oxymoron" if there ever was one; but oddly enough I have seen this statement come true several times in the past. Let's hope and pray that it comes true again this year. Thanks for your time.

