Field Crops Newsletter: October, 2008

In General:

The last few weeks have produced the most abrupt changes I have seen in agriculture. Not only have we undergone a period of difficulty in our fields; we have also experienced a time of unprecedented changes in the financial and economic side of our industry. I can't recall when I have felt justification for using words like traumatic, upheaval, explosive, or revolutionary; but with regard to some aspects of our present condition they may be appropriate. I will not include these words again in this letter; but like many of you I cannot keep them out of my thoughts. We've only thought we had seen volatility in the past. This one is likely to evade description. To deepen the plot even more, we are still awaiting the final rules for running the new farm bill; and we are facing a new presidential administration.

Corn:

Most of the corn has been harvested. Only a few unharvested fields remain scattered around the area. Reasons for delay vary from one farm to another. Equipment problems, lack of storage and drying capacity, and slow field drying are the most common. For some who planted corn with the plan to deal with the harvest challenges when they arrived, there has been an extended wait for everyone else to get their own fields done before moving to help their neighbors. Fortunately, most of our fields stood during the stormy period; but losses have been sustained from deterioration, low to moderate lodging, wildlife damage, and other causes.

Even though lodging has only been a scattered problem in this area, the most significant weather damage has been seen in the form of grain deterioration. Within one of my on-farm trials, damage levels varied from below five percent to almost seventy percent, counting ear rots of several kinds and sprouting of grain on the ear. Although most people seem to consider the ability of a variety to "drop" the ear after maturation as the best way to avoid deterioration; I have come to realize that shuck cover is at least equally important. In the ratings I made this year, those varieties with well-fitting shucks that completely cover the end of the ear had the least damage. Another factor that I had not considered before is that some varieties have loose fitting shucks; and these too showed considerably more grain deterioration.

There is no doubt that the biggest single factor influencing grain deterioration has been the length of time between maturation and harvest; however we should give credit where due to those varieties most capable of dealing with this reality. This year has given us an opportunity for separating the presently available hybrids on this trait; and we should carry this information forward into selection of varieties to be planted in the future.

Many of you have been forced into dealing with moisture levels in corn that we have not experienced in the past. Storage bins not designed for drying have been refitted with burners; and many have struggled to learn the rudiments of natural air drying. Some have experienced close calls with moisture and spontaneous heating in bins. I hope we have avoided serious losses in this; but I fully expect to see some surprises when some of these bins are unloaded and shipped. All of this has stemmed from the fact that fields have not dried down well as in recent years. I don't know how to stress this any stronger; but if you have filled your bins and convinced yourself that everything is OK, better check them again thoroughly. And then check again on a regular basis until the grain is gone. Thankfully, most of you have enjoyed respectable corn yields this year; but the whole thing can still go "sour" in the bin if you don't take care of business. If you don't know how to go about all this, get someone who does to help you. If you are bothered by heights and

don’t want to climb ladders and get into your bins, get someone trustworthy to do it for you. Don’t wait and be sorry.

Soybeans:

Everything is upside down on soybeans this year. Beans that were planted “on time” have been some of our worst performers as the result of weather. They suffered a midsummer drought during pod filling, and then a “monsoon” during maturation. Had we been standing out in fields through all of that weather ourselves, we would probably be in pretty bad condition too. Some varieties weathered better than others; but the basic factor was that those fields and areas that were most stressed by drought were damaged most by the storms. Also, these stressed areas are now covered with green leaves, and stems remain green. Harvest preparatory applications have been required in many of these situations, adding more cost to an already expensive crop.

The bright spot in our soybean crop has been the beans that were either planted in the latter half of May or following wheat. One on-farm (nonirrigated) trial near Winona that was planted following the wheat harvest produced yields ranging from 50 to 65 bushels per acre. Quality was excellent, without a hint of weather damage. This is almost unheard-of for double cropped soybeans without irrigation; but I measured the field and weighed them myself.

We’ve seen some unusual things this year, such as pods with undeveloped seed in the first position, and empty pods scattered about plants in some varieties. Disease levels were surprisingly low, even during the wet period when conditions were favorable for their development. Then, following the wet period, pod and stem blight, Cercospera, and charcoal rot developed quickly. At the end of the season, miraculously after essentially all of our fields were out of danger, Asian rust developed almost everywhere. The obvious question about rust is what this may mean for next year; but that question cannot be answered. A “real” winter with extended periods of subfreezing temperatures would obviously be very positive, not only for rust, but for other diseases and also insects.

Field deterioration has been a severe problem this year in soybeans. Some of the worst damaged fields show almost all of their seeds damaged, while others have lower levels. Stress and planting date have been the primary factors; but varietal differences have played a role as well. While we often associate “gray-podded” varieties with the worst field deterioration, most varieties have been damaged if conditions of stress and weather were poor, including varieties with brown to reddish pubescence. Our on-farm trial at Canton showed very similar levels of visible seed damage for all of the Group 4 varieties in the trial; but the few early to mid Group 5 varieties escaped much of it. This only means that the Group 4 varieties were in the wrong part of their development when conditions were right for damage. The Group 5 varieties avoided most of the damage just because they matured after conditions improved. I don’t feel we should conclude to change to Group 5’s just for this reason since conditions in other years will likely be different.

Cotton:

The Delta will soon be finished with their cotton; and in many fields the stalks have been cut already. Only a few growers have made significant progress with cotton harvesting in the Hills; and even fewer are finished. Until last week, only a few gins were running in the Hills. The problem is that the Hill crop in general is later; and from one half to one third of the bolls have not opened. Leaves are being difficult to remove since plants remained very active following the wet period. Much of our crop is still filling many bolls; and we can’t afford to terminate the crop with a significant portion of our yield still unopened.

We have two separate and fairly distinctive scenarios. Cotton that was planted in April and the early part of May reached cutout about the time that rains began; and those bolls began opening during the hurricane period. Many of these bolls were ruined by bollrot, and stinkbugs

took a toll as well since insecticide applications could not be made on time. Following the rains, these fields basically started over; and the top several nodes now contain fruit in stages varying from squares and blooms to bolls that will likely not open. It's a real mess. Fields that normally yield among the best may produce very poorly. The other scenario is the portion of the crop that was planted in late May or even early June. These fields have the potential to be our best this year since they were damaged little by the storm period; and actually were helped by the abundance of moisture resulting from that time. As with soybeans; this is absolutely backward from our normal situation.

As I said in the last letter, we will likely be harvesting cotton with our coats on this year. One dedicated cotton producer commented that "We will probably have Thanksgiving dinner in the cotton field this year". My hope is that we will have a chance to harvest this crop, regardless of the temperature. Everyone I talk with is concerned that the fall rains may arrive about the time we get started harvesting the better part of this crop; but we've already had one wet period. Maybe we won't have two in the same year.

Wheat:

No one seems to know what to do about planting wheat. The present consensus seems to be a reluctance to plant wheat; but I feel the market will rebound to some degree. Our carryover stocks are of course a little above last year's levels at this time; but not much. World stocks of wheat are still low relative to historical levels. We are in the throes of this economic crisis right now; and it will take some time for the "fix" to work. When things do settle down, we should see at least some resurgence in wheat prices. I do not expect us to see prices equal to last year; but if fuel and fertilizer prices continue to decline as they are currently, this should allow us to be profitable with wheat. Don't forget that I am an optimist; and study this for yourself.

Unfortunately, wheat seed prices are probably locked in pretty tight at the high levels carried over from last year. However, we can cut this cost some by doing a better job of planting to maximize emergence and survival which will allow for some reduction in seeding rates. Since this is a "hot" topic among many people I will leave it at that; however I am including at the end of this letter some data from a 2004 and 2005 trial done by Dr. Rick Mascagni and others on the LSU station at Winnsboro that shows the capability of wheat to compensate for stand (Table 1). The objective is to get a uniform stand of healthy plants that can maximize sunlight interception, produce abundant tillers, and suppress the emergence of competitive weeds. Remember as well that excessively thick stands may complicate disease and insect management issues.

There is some interest in public wheat varieties, some of which have been planted in this area in the past. These varieties are sold for significantly lower prices; but have not been as thoroughly evaluated as most of the commercial breeder varieties. Those who have planted them report good yields under good management.

As several of us have stressed, don't take excessive risks with freeze injury by planting too early. My suggestion is that you delay planting at least until November 1st, and more preferably until November 10th. Some of our best yields have come from fields planted as late as November 20th. We have seen freeze injury cause catastrophic injury to wheat in the past two years; and we certainly do not want to repeat that. Later planting is of course no guarantee that you will escape freeze damage; but it greatly reduces the likelihood of that problem. If my telling you this is not sufficient; please take time to visit one of the producers who planted too early last year, did everything else right, and then either destroyed their wheat or settled for yields in the 20 to 30 bushel per acre range instead of the 60 to 90 bushel levels achieved by many of their more patient neighbors.

One of the best ways to reduce costs in wheat is to plant it without tillage with a no-till drill. This also offers a lot of flexibility in the time of seeding since the soil will support equipment very soon after a rain. I realize this challenges

much of the established thinking for planting wheat in this area; however this is a proven practice used worldwide. With no-till we can wait until after a good frost without as much worry about getting planted.

Test your soil to make sure you don't have any serious nutrient deficiencies or pH levels that will limit yield potential. Like most of us, you are probably watching fertilizer prices very closely right now, and hoping this major cost factor will drop within reasonable limits to allow you to be profitable. As always, fix your pH first, making sure that your soil is not much below pH 6.0, and preferably around 6.2 to 6.5 for best fertilizer use efficiency, good tillering, and high yields. When you need it, lime is still the best soil fertility investment.

In Conclusion:

Whatever you do, please plan to take the time to vote this year. If you do not exercise this right and duty as an American citizen, we cannot expect our democratic system to work as it should. Pray that we make the right choice. Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Ernest H. Flint, Ph.D., CCA

Area Agent – Agronomic Crops

Seeding rate No./sq ft	Yield Bu./acre	Plants[1] No./sq ft	Seeding rate No./sq ft	Yield Bu./acre	Plants No./sq ft
4	72.1	5.1	4	76.1	4.6
8	81.4	7.8	8	89.0	9
16	84.6	13.9	16	90.8	13.3
24	85.0	20.8	24	92.1	23.8
32	81.8	27.3	32	90.0	29.4

Table 1. The influence of seeding rate on grain yield in wheat, averaged across two varieties at the Macon Ridge Research Station at Winnsboro, LA in 2004 and 2005, respectively. (An extract from the complete study by Mascagni, Harrison, Padget, and Bell.