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While northern and western Iowa have been receiving their share of snow so far this fall central Iowa finally had Mother Nature land a hard left to the jaw this past weekend. Eight to ten inches of snow and 60 mph winds made Saturday night one that was good for staying home. Those quantities were still a lot better than the 26 inches that fell near Winona and the amounts that collapsed the Metrodome. As it was on those afternoons, wearing a ski mask and insulated coveralls made things just tolerable. I just have to remember to remove the ski mask when entering any store or gas station. Oh well, this is winter and we do live in Iowa. At least two months of winter are over with, making the cold season months shorter than last season.

The good things that could be expected so far as benefits from the colder weather is that the ground has finally frozen with little to no snow cover. That should help break up any shallow compaction that would still exist as well as break up any soil chunks that were brought up during the fall field work. The long fall should have been helpful to stalk degradation and residue decomposition. Guidelines given for minimizing the survival of Goss's Wilt inoculum has stressed residue sizing and turning residue under, so a portion of that should have occurred.

The early winter planning season continues and we can see where growers in the normal 'early decision making' territory are following form and getting done with seed ordering. Next they will be finalizing herbicide decisions and getting those early orders placed or at least reserved. Now growers in other regions will be going about the similar business and assembling product information, adding in their scouting notes and harvest time observations, and will make those decisions when they feel compelled to take action.

The Expected Acre Battle

At the Farm News Ag Show Dave Kruse relayed the market evaluation that four to five million additional corn acres would need to be planted in 2011 to meet demand. Even with more corn stalk ground receiving anhydrous acres that fall in the northern and central Iowa area, where everyone expects those acres to materialize from is still a guess. So far the most popular opinion is they are most likely to come from bean acres, with those acres replaced by acres doubled cropped after spring wheat in the eastern cornbelt. Who is willing to bet that problems with late wheat harvest, and either too wet or too dry of soils are not likely to be problems? With Russian, China, and possibly South American countries having their production problems, can country leaders bet on grain surpluses existing through the coming two years. A tight supply that supports but doesn't explode prices is something that quite a few growers would vote for.

Five to ten years ago every crop size forecaster would already be releasing their guesses for the size of the next years' crops. Those expectations typically predicted beating the previous year's crops by one to three bushels of corn and another .5 to .75 Bu better beans. After this year's major problems with Goss's, Fusarium root rots, SDS, and other diseases, all the commodity personnel who are not trained to know plant diseases are not sure what to think. That includes most of them. We might see that this fall's compulsion to not break with the herd might change as those with more expertise begin trusting their hunches. On top of that is the Farmer Benner cycle which has looked at previous history and tree rings to note that droughts have never been more that twenty three years apart. It is hard to ignore two hundred years of history.

Droughts

If we think back to recent drought years each of them seemed to follow different patterns. Some started early and some began late. There were years where the soil profile was on the empty side going into the season and some where it was over half full. There have also been one or two seasons where serious droughts occurred during winter months and there were no cropping repercussions. Looking at our expected conditions for next spring the profiles in most parts of the state should be within an inch or two of being full.

The challenge then if it gets dry could be to see which farmers can grow the deepest roots and who can keep the soils in the best shape to soak up the rains that fall. It has been a while since we have had a prolonged dry spell so there are likely hybrids which have not been tested for performance under drought conditions since they have been commercialized. After the floods and saturated conditions of both 2009 and 2010, being dry in May and June is what many growers would appreciate. Just give us rain through July and August and things would work fine.

Residual Herbicides

Herbicide dealers are reporting that a much higher percentage of growers are asking about and making plans to use residual products again in their fields. Watching their fields get very woolly while they sit on the sidelines, hearing stories about very tolerant weeds in their neighborhoods or in southern states, or listening to the advice of seasoned crop advisors is finally having an effect. Most of those advisors have always liked to see farmers use multiple modes of action to delay or prevent weeds from developing tolerance to the widely used products. The need still exists for new families, but as stated last week, the financial rewards have not been there for any company willing to stick their necks out financially.

One series of studies that has been publicized is those by Clarence Swanton at the U of Guelph. In them the weed scientist studied how both corn and beans responded to weed and grass competitors that grew to various heights before being removed. They found that once the weeds grew to more than one inch in height the ability of the crop plants to recover from the shading and degree of light reflection was limited. Leaf and rooting amounts varied as did the orientation of their growth and sometimes never made a full recovery. Often the cost of applying a partial to full rate of a residual product would have been covered several times with the higher yields.

Gypsum Anyone

The use of gypsum applied to soils that have high pH levels and are 'tight' has been increasing in recent seasons. Those who had either the mined or flue generated products applied have noticed that their soil are easier to work and fewer problems with iron chlorosis. In fact more universities and the EPA staff members have looked at the reviewed studies and listened to the grower testimonies where such materials have been applied with very good results. I know I have had to change my opinion from ten years ago as I have seen good results in many with different products. Plus I had the chance to listen to Dr. Darrell Norton of Ohio State talks about the results from his many years worth of trials. In addition applying gypsum will help supply sulfur, which many soil and tissue tests are verifying that fields are becoming increasingly deficient of.

Anyone who is considering having such products applied for the coming season should be contacting their supplier ASAP. The expected higher grain prices has to be making growers sort through what practices rate a high chance of boosting their 2011 gross and net returns and acting. Supplies were very tight this past fall and will likely be so next spring.

Good luck in staying warm and preparing for the holidays.