June 9, 2017

WHEAT DECLINE IMPACTS

Mark Knobel, Fairbury, hosted the UNL wheat plot tour this year with 30 varieties and experimental lines. The plots are all marked so if you are interested please stop by and look. Mark did an excellent job on managing the field and plot area. It's not hard to find the plot. On Highway 15 north of Fairbury, there is the famous tall "Bower Corner" sign. Go one mile north and go two miles west on County Road 721.

Dr. Stephen Baenziger, UNL, commented on a new experimental that looked really promising and he is crossing it to improve the uniformity. New lines in Nebraska have to make good bread first, if it doesn't, it gets discarded. Make sure and look at NE12561 in the second alley on the north side. They are all marked. Take a look at the new Ruth and compare it to other current popular varieties for our area including Freeman, SY Wolf, Cedar, Overland and Zenda. Zenda is an Everest replacement out of the KSU breeding program and that's what has been planted in the field surrounding the UNL trial. It has better wheat quality than Everest which is very important in our nation's exports.

The summer wheat lines of trucks going to the local elevators is over with since the early 80's and 90's. In 1980, Saline County farmers harvested 66,000 acres of winter wheat that averaged 36 bu/acre. In 1990, we planted 43,000 acres at 40 bu per acre. When GMO corn and soybeans became popular in the 1990's, wheat acres dropped like a rock and by the year 2000, Saline County farmers planted 14,000 acres of winter wheat with a county average 35 bushel yield, the same production as in 1980. In 2015, we had a fusarium head scab outbreak with 6,400 acres harvested and large discounts at the marketplace. Last year we had 4,300 acres harvested with high yields but low protein and wide basis at our local market. This year we have even fewer acres planted and this week summer delivery of wheat was priced at $3.63 per bushel locally. So why does this matter? It matters for many reasons including the following side benefits. Soil conservation is improved with wheat in rotation. That additional residue on highly erodible land makes a difference and slows down ephemeral erosion (small ditches) that NRCS is now concentrating on with conservation plans. The stubble aids in water retention for the next crop and Gage County Educator Paul Hay has documented 25-28 more bushels of corn on average, planting no-till corn into wheat stubble compared to other planting options. There is double crop potential with wheat to sunflowers, soybeans, forages and cover crops for soil health or cattle grazing adding to soil health and diversity. Wheat straw is excellent bedding and can be mixed with other forages and feeds or to bring moisture down with wet corn or rye silage. Wheat is a great boost to wildlife, especially upland birds. A third crop in rotation helps to break weed cycles and gives us a window to better control waterhemp and palmer amaranth and other difficult weeds that are becoming glyphosate resistant. Wheat gives an opportunity to do conservation work in the summer and contractors are more available. Wheat gives us opportunity to apply manure from poultry, beef, dairy and swine facilities to improve soils.

The income is very handy to reduce operating cost loans for the fall crops of corn, soybeans, and milo. Wheat produces nearly the same bushels when no-tilled behind soybeans, milo, or corn as it does on second year wheat or retiring alfalfa acres. In drought years, with fall harvested crops, wheat often fairs well in those years.

Farmers find it difficult on cash rent farms to annually cash flow wheat. Cereal rye being used as a cover crop cannot be mixed with wheat or large discounts can apply in the marketplace. Managing diseases takes extra management skill for high yielding potential. Wheat yields have not increased at a pace that corn has over time.

The bottom line is if farmers would get paid more for this crop on an annual basis to compete with corn or soybeans in Southeast Nebraska, they would plant more wheat. We have diminished wheat to a minor crop in the area and it has diminished cropping diversity.

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