



.....STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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I get teased quite a bit about my affinity for two crops – wheat and grain sorghum. But of those two, milo gets the strongest reaction and it is usually involves several four letter words. No, not what you are thinking – they are more indicative of historic encounters including: itch, dust, weed, cane and cash. Now that last part of that equation looks pretty darn good to me. Strong demand from both domestic and international markets is sending strong signals to growers, indicating it may be prime time to consider increasing grain sorghum acres. I will explain that a little later, but first I think we need to look at some other factors in this part of the state that gives other credence to that thought. Let's explore a crop that used to be a strong staple in Nebraska and particularly in our rain-fed crops part of the world but had lost some favor.

I know, everyone thinks with a couple of small rains that we are out of the drought. I keep hearing "million dollar rains". There is no doubt these make you feel a lot better and the clean fresh smell that follows a rain is wonderful. But I just cannot shake the gut feeling that this spring feels a lot like 2012 where we had limited fall rains, very little winter snow and then sparse rains in the spring. One only has to look at the wheat and the pasture grasses to know that we are not even close to the kind of subsoil moisture that we need to raise a great corn crop – even with the "drought-resistance" genetics. Grain sorghum was developed and used extensively because it was the original drought crop. It is also considered the best grazer field grain residue for running cows after harvest. But it has lost favor over the years and acres have dropped.

We may just see a resurgence of this great crop and not only because of the specter of a potential drought in 2015. Part of this will be dictated by the market place. You are already seeing it with a 80-90 cent spread above corn on a per bushel area, and it looks to get even stronger. This strong demand established by a number of market factors creates positive opportunities for sorghum growers across the U.S, leading to increased profitability. I recently came across the top five reasons producers should consider growing grain sorghum this year. These may just surprise some milo detractors.

First, we are now looking at the highest new crop bids in history for grain sorghum. For the first time, new crop bids for grain sorghum are highly competitive with comparable grains. Producers are experiencing more options when it comes to marketing their grain sorghum, resulting in more incentive to increase acres with these current competitive prices. Milo producers are seeing very good basis right now. This is the first time we have seen prices above corn. Grain sorghum acres are already increasing and interest is on the rise and for the first time in many years producers are starting to add grain sorghum in rotation. Something I have wanted to see for years. The potential is outstanding.

What is the reason you might ask? The short answer is that there is strong demand for sorghum grains globally: The recent skyrocketing demand for grain sorghum internationally is no secret. China entered the export market for grain sorghum in 2013 and since then, exports have been on the rise. Domestically, we are seeing grain sorghum expanding and growing in sectors like human food, ethanol and livestock feed. Some of this is due to a new interest; some to the non-GMO attributes; and we must consider the gluten free aspects of grain sorghum, which has become a huge consumer trend. All of this is leading to more opportunity for producers. Especially if they are dry land or limited irrigation farmers.

Secondly, I believe we have to look at the highest potential profit. During this challenging time for producers with the prospect for continued drought, considering production costs is imperative. Currently sorghum seed prices are marking in at a lower cost than comparable crops, creating a larger profit margin for producers. Now we are on the brink of new multi-seed trait that dramatically increase yields, yet uses the same water and same land. We can get the same yield as corn, using about half the water corn uses. Less water and more profit is a win-win situation. From a purely economic standpoint sorghum potentially could have as much or more profit than competitive grains because the inputs are simply less and in my mind it is a crop that needs to be looked at more seriously every year and especially in a year like this.

Farming is about risks and the Farm Bill is not the only risk protection we should consider. I like milo because of risk aversion. We all know that for the most part grain sorghum is drought and heat-tolerant, so it has elevated potential to be a high profitability crop in many areas. Water is a precious commodity and will continue to be even more critical in the coming years. Where water shortages are a challenge for producers, grain sorghum can still produce high yields and make profit, especially with the increase in demand for grain sorghum in a wide array of markets. We must consider that with low rainfall, we have still been able to produce a sorghum crop and have something to take to the elevator or put in the bin.

With the advent of new sorghum varieties plus the arrival of the first herbicide-resistant grain sorghum hybrid, which features resistance to an ALS herbicide we find strong yield potential. High yields in grain sorghum are becoming more prevalent. That more farmers are thinking about growing grain sorghum this year is a testament to the crop's nitrogen- and water-efficiency. Some of the disease traits and drought traits that are coming down the pipeline are giving a farmer the tools to grow sorghum and have really good yields. These new traits plus the combination of grain sorghum's ability to withstand inclement weather and high basis combine in my opinion to make grain sorghum a smart choice for producers across the Midwest and particularly in SC Nebraska. There is so much more we should address considering this magnificent feed grain. I think we need to look at this crop with more detail next week, but for now – Go Milo!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or UNL Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, UNL Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu/home>