

Drought brings early harvest

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Dryland corn combines out this week

Pivots are still running full tilt this week on irrigated corn and soybeans but dryland harvest is expected to begin this week in the Gothenburg area.

The lingering drought has forced harvest of dryland corn up to a month early and irrigated corn two to three weeks ahead of schedule.

Dryland corn plants have shut down because of lack of moisture, said University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension educator Allen Corr.

“It was so hot for so long that the corn plant shut down to protect itself,” Corr said. “There’s more stress the farther west you go.”

Irrigated corn harvest is expected to begin mid September which is about three weeks ahead of time, according to long-time area producer Roger Wahlgren.

Wahlgren raises irrigated corn, popcorn, soybeans, alfalfa and dryland wheat with his son, Joe Wahlgren.

With soybean harvest poised to start toward the end of September, they’ll most likely start picking corn first.

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That's something Wahlgren said he's never seen during 40 years of farming.

Nor has he witnessed drought as bad as this year.

"That will complicate things but it's not something we can't do," he said, noting that combine heads will have to be switched to accommodate the different crops. "We'll do corn in the morning and beans in the afternoon when it's fairly dry."

Wahlgren expects slightly-above average crops for both.



More heat units during the day has helped grow larger and deeper kernels on longer ears, he said.

"Cool nights and warm days are a perfect scenario for kernel fill," Wahlgren said.

Despite the drought, the producer said he can raise a better crop during a hot, dry year like this growing season than during a wet year.

"That's because of access to more heat units," he explained. "Cooler, damp temperatures mean less sunshine."

Soybean pods are also filling nicely, Wahlgren said.

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Corr said soybeans are doing well because temperatures cooled into the 80s during reproduction when pods began to fill.

With prices hovering in the \$8-bushel range for corn and \$17 for soybeans, farmers should fare well in the marketplace.

However Wahlgren noted that inputs, primarily water and electricity, have nearly doubled in price compared to previous years.

And dryland corn, planted on field corners, won't produce much nor will spots with plugged drip nozzles.

"When we harvest, we'll average in the zero acres and it will take good irrigated corn to bring up yields," he said.

Corr said dryland corn farmers can expect up to 50% less in average yields.

In addition to smaller kernels, he said stalks are generally shorter than normal which means less residue for ground cover and more evaporation.

"Cows on stalks in the winter will have less feed," he said.

Looking ahead to next year's growing season, Corr said subsoil moisture will be compromised in dryland fields unless there's adequate rain.

"That's going to be an issue through the hot times of July," he noted.

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Wahlgren said pivot irrigation has been a big plus during this season's drought.

"We could add water in the spring whereas there was no water in the canal (for surface irrigation) until June," he said.

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