

Rain eases tough planting conditions

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Dry soil, cold spring challenge area farmers

Last Thursday, area farmer John Hecox described spring planting as the most challenging he's seen in several years.

As a dry wind gusted around his satellite shop near Brady, Hecox said there hadn't been significant moisture all spring—especially in April when showers are supposed to bring May flowers.

Hecox and other producers got their wish Sunday night and Monday when about 1 inches drenched the area.

“It's definitely a relief,” he said Monday.

Another obstacle to planting corn this year was a cold spring that stretched into mid April.

“We were late doing field preparation because of cold soil temperatures and then ‘boom,’ it started to get warm,” Hecox said. “It made the window tight (between field preparation and planting) and we had to push harder.”

As Hecox and his field hands drove tractors hitched to planters into fields, he said the planters furrowed one to two inches of dry dirt just to get to soil with good moisture for corn seed.

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In fact, he said conditions were so parched in mid April that they used pivots to water fields after planting.

Moisture is key to planting, Hecox explained, so plants emerge from the ground uniformly.

“You want them to surface at the same time,” he said.

That’s important so one plant doesn’t dominate another to keep it from receiving abundant sunlight and moisture that can result in weeds around the dwarf stalk.

Hecox added that soil profiles still lag behind from the drought of 2012.

“And dryland acres are really suffering,” he said.

Another spring-planting challenge Hecox noted is keeping employees accident free and equipment operating at its peak performance.

Statistic show that 15 to 20 people die in farm accidents every year in Nebraska.

A 2014 Time magazine article listed farmers, ranchers and agricultural managers as having the ninth most dangerous job in the United States.

The article said 21.3 deaths per 100 workers occurred in 2012.

Hecox will be like many other farmers this year who plan to plant more acres of soybeans mostly because of higher prices.

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He said crop rotation to improve field health and risk management are other factors in his decision.

“You spread the risk out by planting soybeans,” Hecox explained, noting that soybeans also require fewer inputs than corn.

Another benefit is that soybeans can be harvested before corn, he said.

Hecox, who’s a fourth-generation farmer, started farming with his father, Jim Hecox, at age 10.

What he loves most about the occupation is being outdoors to enjoy Mother Nature and the fact that farmers feed the world.

“I think of it as a way of life, not a job,” Hecox said.

In addition to corn and soybeans, the Hecoxes raise popcorn, alfalfa and cattle.

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