

Harvest 2010

Is Just Around the Corner!

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New technology changing how farmers harvest

By Becky Tanner
The Wichita Eagle

WICHITA (AP) – For more than a century, the Kansas wheat harvest has been a symbolic icon of the state’s heritage, giving us the names the Wheat State and the breadbasket of the world.

But the combines and equipment rising over the state’s horizon this past week are vastly different from a generation ago.

More expensive equipment means farms have to be bigger. And that means there are fewer family farms.

“Used to be our dads had two to three quarters of land and they were good, and now you have to have 10,” (or 1,600 acres) said Wendy Mawhirter, a fourth-generation farmer from Stafford County, who farms alongside her husband, Jeff, and two grown sons, Darren and Cole.

A half a century ago, wheat harvest meant wheat crews of 10 to 12 people – men, women and children all working in the fields.

Now, Mawhirter said, her family’s wheat crew consists of four people and they are done in half the time.

Elaborate meals for the crews used to

consist of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy – sometimes served as late as midnight.

Now, she says, crew members pack their own lunches for the day – take a sandwich and hit the road, sometimes not stopping until late at night.

“It takes less people to do more,” Mawhirter said. “And it is so hard to make a living with the wheat prices, the fertilizer and seed.”

The average wheat price in central Kansas ranges from \$3.60 to \$4 a bushel; it’s \$3.79 at the Kanza Co-op in Dillwyn where the Mawhirters take their grain.

This year’s prices are unusually low because so much is left over nationally and worldwide from earlier seasons, said Dan O’Brien, an agricultural economist at Kansas State University.

Cash prices, or the price farmers typically get when they bring their crops to the local grain elevators, usually drops during the harvest because of plentiful supplies.

“City people may think we take in the money,” Mawhirter said. “Well, we make a lot of money but we owe more money. You can just add a zero onto everything.”

The 2010 Kansas wheat harvest was about 10 to 20 percent harvested on Tuesday, said Aaron Harries, director of marketing for the Kansas Wheat Commission. The majority of wheat harvested or being harvested was south of I-70 and in much of southwestern Kansas.

The wheat harvest creeps northward across Kansas at 12 to 15 miles a day.

By this weekend, Harries estimates much of the state – from the Nebraska to the Oklahoma state lines to the far western edges – will be in harvest.

The far northwestern corner of the state may be harvesting well after July 4.

Sumner County wheat farmer Dennis Metz, now in his 60th harvest, remembers riding in the wheat truck as a small boy while his mom drove to the country elevator where they dumped the wheat.

It was right after World War II, and his dad had bought a 1948 Chevrolet 1-ton pickup truck that could haul 100 bushels of wheat. They harvested with an Allis-Chalmers combine that cut a 5-foot swath. And those were the days when they pulled the combine with a tractor, no cab on top of equipment.

Easily it would take 10 days to two

weeks for Metz’s father to harvest 300 acres.

Harvest can take Metz about a week now to complete, but he’s cutting about 1,500 acres, sometimes as much as 200 acres in a day.

His combines – like those of the Mawhirters in Stafford County – cut 30- to 40-foot swaths, have GPS systems, auto steering and amenities such as air conditioning and computer systems.

The price tag for new combines is more than many homes in Sedgwick County – between \$250,000 and \$350,000.

That’s just for a combine, said Mike Estes, a fourth-generation John Deere dealer, based in Greensburg. His family founded the Bucklin Tractor and Implement Co. in southwest Kansas.

Tractors are a good \$100,000 and then there are grain carts, which can cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$70,000. The semi trucks can run another \$100,000.

“Farmers buy what they can afford and use it and fix it – that’s why we have big shops, that’s why we sell parts,” Estes said. “The dealerships out here are just like the farmers. There are fewer of us around. There are fewer locations. Just as

farmers had to get bigger, we had to get bigger.”

Metz bought his 12-year-old International combine used but “it’s got all the stuff on it.”

“It’s smarter than I am,” Metz said. “It tells you the moisture content. As it goes across the field, it will tell you where the wheat is thick or thin. You hook that into your laptop, you can take the fertilizer to those same spots and it will have the sprayer set so you don’t overspray or leave skips.”

In the old days, Metz used to determine whether the wheat was ripe by taking a few kernels of wheat and popping them in his mouth to see if they’d crunch when he chewed them.

That’s not good enough anymore for the elevators, he said.

“The elevator man wants more sophisticated information,” Metz said. “Any more, no Joe Blow can get in a tractor or combine and run it. You have to be educated. Technology has really changed things.”

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