

Cold, low humidity threaten this year's winter wheat crop

A combination of low temperatures, dry soil and poorly developed wheat has created concern about the current crop's survival, said Jim Shroyer, K-State Research and Extension crop production specialist, but only time will tell. Wheat is tough.

Will the wheat be able to survive this combination? There is no definitive answer at this point, but Shroyer said there are some basic questions to ask when evaluating how well winter wheat can survive cold weather:

- How well has the wheat cold hardened? When temperatures get colder gradually, that helps wheat plants develop good winterhardiness.

"When temperatures remain unusually warm late into the fall," the K-State agronomist said, "then suddenly drop into the low teens, plants are less likely to have had time to cold harden properly and will be more susceptible to winterkill. This fall, temperatures have fallen off gradually. As a result, the wheat should be adequately cold hardened in most cases."

- How well developed is the root system? Poor root development is a concern where the weather has been dry.

"Where wheat plants have a good crown-root system and two

or more tillers, they will tolerate the cold better. If plants are poorly developed going into winter, with very few secondary roots and no tillers, they will be more susceptible to winterkill or desiccation, especially when soils remain dry," Shroyer said.

Poor development of secondary roots may not be readily apparent unless the plants are pulled up and examined, he added.

- How cold is the soil at the crown level? Cold injury is possible if soil temperatures at the crown level – about one inch deep – fall into the single digits. When the soil is dry and there is no snow cover, as is the case now, the potential for cold injury is higher, especially on exposed slopes or terrace tops, depending on the condition of the plants.

- Is the crown well protected by soil? If wheat is planted at the correct depth, about 1 1/2 to 2 inches deep, and in good contact with the soil, the crown should be reasonably well protected by the soil. If the seed was planted too shallow, then the crown may have developed too close to the soil surface and will be more susceptible to winterkill, he said. Also, if the seed was planted into loose soil or in heavy surface residue, the crown could be more exposed and

could be susceptible to cold and desiccation.

- Is there any insect or disease damage to the plants? Damage from winter grain mites, brown wheat mites, fall armyworm, aphids, Hessian fly and crown and root rot can weaken plants and make them more susceptible to injury from cold-weather stress or desiccation.

In most cases, farmers won't know for sure if the wheat has survived cold temperatures until early spring, Shroyer said.

"If plants are killed outright by cold temperatures, they won't green up next spring," he said, "but if they are only damaged, it might take them awhile to die. They will green up and then slowly go backwards."

Direct cold injury is not the only potential problem, he added. Under the kind of dry conditions the state is experiencing, wheat plants may suffer from desiccation and from injury caused by blowing dust, he said.

"Any of these factors can kill or weaken plants," Shroyer said, "but you never want to count wheat out too early unless it has blown out. Wheat has a remarkable ability to withstand more than seems possible at times."

Dietician gives parents advice on new school lunch guidelines

Recent changes in school lunch menus required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act are generating discussion in the nation's school districts.

"The 2012 changes in the menus are intended to address concerns about children's nutrition, health and obesity that can lead to chronic diseases," said Sandy Procter, K-State Research and Extension nutrition specialist, and state coordinator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education and Family Nutrition Programs. "People have been complaining about school lunch for years."

Procter, a registered dietitian, said complaints often focused on school lunch menus with too many high-fat and fried foods, lack of age-appropriate portions and less costly foods rather than nutrient-dense foods that could cost more, but contribute to health.

"These are the first changes to the school lunch guidelines in many years, and in many districts, the difference is significant. In other places, voluntary improvement has been gradual over time, so students and parents see little change this year."

Procter noted the changes to school lunch menus are based on research and intended to address specific nutrition and health issues, including:

- Age-appropriate portions for three groups: kindergarten through 8-year-olds; 9- to 12-year-olds and high school students.

- Health-promoting foods, including lean proteins, low-fat dairy products, fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

She said the move toward standard portions helps youths meet nutritional requirements for health and become more familiar with a standard portion. Kids will be more able to choose an appropriate portion when at home or on their own, and place a cap on calories to help manage a healthy weight.

Expanding the variety of foods offered meets Department of Health and Human Services and Agriculture 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, but does add to the cost, which is supported with additional federal money, she said.

If children and teens are complaining to parents about not getting enough to eat, they may simply be choosing not to eat the foods offered, said Procter, who noted that youths who are not familiar with fruits, vegetables, whole-grain breads, crackers and cereals, or dairy products served may initially shy away from them.

While adjusting to the changes will likely be a gradual process, Procter said, many food-service professionals report students mak-

ing the adjustments fairly quickly.

"Youths who eat an increased variety of foods can begin enjoying health benefits – increased energy, greater ability to manage a healthy weight, more restful sleep, healthy skin and improved overall resistance to illness are possible examples – almost immediately," she said.

School lunch or breakfast menus may not suit everyone, said Procter, who noted that some may prefer a sack lunch from home.

She advised parents to plan snacks to fill the gaps between meals, with a preference for health-promoting snacks, rather than pre-packaged snack foods that introduce extra calories, fat and sodium.

If, for example, students will be staying for after-school activities or sports, Procter advised checking with the school office for a list of snacks that can be sent with students.

She said to check with the school, as many kids are critically allergic to everyday foods, such as peanut butter.

A whole-grain granola bar, fruit, cheese and crackers are non-perishable snacks that will fill the gap between meals, she said.

While parents and nutritionists support the idea of kids coming home hungry so they'll be ready to eat the evening meal, Procter

Windbreaks protect cattle herds from winter temps and windchill

Established tree windbreaks sheltering beef and dairy cattle operations can save farmers and stockmen money on feed costs, weight loss and milk production during the winter.

A heavy winter coat protects beef cattle until temperatures drop below 18 degrees, but beyond that point, says Bob Atchison with the Kansas Forest Service, the animals require additional feed to maintain body temperatures. The presence of a windbreak can help remedy this problem.

"A 25 mph wind at 0 degrees creates a windchill of 44 degrees below zero," said Atchison. "By

contrast, a properly designed windbreak will reduce the same windchill to 15 below."

Atchison said windbreaks can reduce the spike in energy requirements cattle need to maintain their body temperature during extreme cold weather. He cited Canadian researchers, who found that cattle on winter range, in unprotected sites, required a 50 percent increase in feed for normal activities.

"A properly designed windbreak will reduce these needs by half," he said.

Windbreaks enable cattle to gain and maintain weight better as well. He also cited studies in

Montana indicating that during mild winters, beef cattle sheltered by windbreaks gained an average of 34 to 35 pounds more than cattle in an open feedlot. During severe winters, cattle in feedlots protected from the wind maintained 10.6 more pounds than cattle in unprotected lots.

The service is now accepting tree orders from landowners interested in establishing livestock windbreaks. Foresters also are available to assist with planning a tree planting. For information, contact the service at (785) 532-3300 or go to www.KansasForests.org.

Farm Service Agency now offering farmers, ranchers conservation loans

The federal Farm Service Agency has money for guaranteed conservation loans, which allow farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices to help protect natural resources.

"Guaranteed conservation loans are a useful alternative to help operators implement any Natural Resources Conservation Service-

approved conservation practice including ... waste management systems, conservation structures or water conservation measures," said Adrian J. Polansky, state executive director of the agency.

Unlike other guaranteed-loan programs, he said, conservation loans are not limited to family size farms. Larger operators may be eligible. The loan limit is \$1.3 million and interest rates and terms vary. The maximum guarantee the agency can issue is 75 percent.

A streamlined application process is available for applicants with a strong financial position.

This eliminates the requirement to provide a cash flow statement and other documentation.

Applicants who do not already have a conservation plan approved by the conservation service should work with their county office to develop one. Lenders can reduce risk, increase liquidity and offer lower rates by selling the guaranteed portion in the secondary market.

For questions, contact your lender or the Farm Loan Program staff at your county Farm Service office, 462-7671 or go to www.fsa.usda.gov/ks.

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