

Opinion

Is There A Risk In Planting Only Corn?

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

I remember when diversification was still “cool” to do. I was riding in my mom’s car as a kid and watching field after field flash by the car on the



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way to town to buy groceries or go to church — there were wheat fields and milo, corn fields and soybeans, alfalfa stands and pasture. Pretty much all

there is now is corn. Sure, we have some soybeans and alfalfa out there and maybe a pasture here and there on the hillier ground near the creeks and the bluffs south of the Missouri, but on the choice cropland, the crop of choice is corn.

I grew up learning not to put all your eggs in one basket, lest you drop your basket — in other words, don’t rely on one crop for your farm’s income, lest something happens to its yield or the market bottoms out. Of course, I suppose the person who coined that catch phrase didn’t see the market conditions we have today for corn. But I still wonder if producers are risking too much to put so much of their faith into just one crop.

Here’s a bit of news: The South Dakota Crop Improvement Association has reported that some varieties of seed corn are in short supply, due to a lower-than-hoped-for yield last year because of flooded acres and poor pollination weather. Apparently, it’s the better varieties that aren’t going to be available to all producers who want them, and these producers will have to settle for less desirable varieties that may not give producers the right maturity they need for their farm.

OK, so weather-related effects on yield are an every-year occurrence. But my point is, I wonder how many of those producers are relying on corn — and only corn — for their annual income now? And what happens if their corn doesn’t pull through? Maybe the government payments or the crop insurance will pay out well, but should we be relying on these programs when we could be relying instead on our ability to produce another crop that has the potential to yield nicely?

But yet, there’s a reason only corn is being grown — it pays and well. Why choose another crop that may not yield as much as corn or get as great a price? Producers aren’t martyrs after all; they’re business owners.

I guess it depends on each person’s point of view. Some of us see it to be a risk to specialize — what if something happens to that one crop? Others see it to be a risk to diversify — why pass up the potential for more income by growing these less profitable crops rather than focusing energy onto the most profitable crop? It’s an interesting juxtaposition and a debate that only time will settle as we see how the corn-only trend plays out in years to come.

Early To Pasture



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

The Early Spring Has Creates Pros, Cons For Grazing

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

This year’s early spring has raised a lot of questions since producers first began to entertain the idea of turning livestock out into pastures at the start of March.

According to range specialist Roger Gates with the South Dakota State University Extension service, since the mild winter didn’t use up forage reserves, producers weren’t quick to open the pasture gate in order to reduce feed costs. And that’s a good thing, because grazing too early will reduce forage production in future months — as much as 50 percent for the entire year. Grass plants are most vulnerable to long-term damage if grazed before they have formed the first three leaves.

However, this early spring has put many producers in a predicament. While grasses shouldn’t be grazed too early, their broadleaf competitors aren’t holding back.

“These weeds will remove moisture that could be used for grass growth later on and they remove valuable nutrients from the soil,” said Bruce Anderson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension forage specialist. “Early weeds also can develop so much growth that they can shade, smother, and reduce early growth of your summer pasture grasses.”

That’s why producers often turn to prescribed burning or herbicides, but Anderson said that pre-season

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BRUCE ANDERSON

grazing — once the grass plants are past the point of vulnerability — can control the weeds without the cost of chemical or the safety concerns of a burn as well as turn the weeds into feed value. Heavy pre-season grazing won’t harm forage production as long as it’s stopped by late May or early June before the warm-season grasses get going strong.

But there is more to pasture management than maximizing the amount of forage available: Depending on the growing conditions, grazing at the wrong times can be deadly. According to SDSU materials, waiting a week after a frost to continue grazing can prevent losses from prussic acid poisoning, which occur after a non-killing frost changes the plants’ metabolism. Supplemental magnesium can reduce cattle deaths from grass tetany, which occurs when livestock graze fast-growing grasses. And gradually transitioning livestock from the dry lot to the pasture, perhaps by limiting grazing in the first few days, helps prevent nitrate poisoning, which happens

when an animal’s diet changes rapidly from a lower-quality ration to rich pastures. Another common complaint by producers is bloat, which also occurs when livestock are turned out onto lush pastures following a lower-quality feed ration. Bloat is most common in pastures with legumes such as clover. Producers should wait to turn livestock onto pastures until the dew has dried, and should make sure that the animals are not overly hungry when moved to a new pasture in the spring. Keeping hay available as the animals get used to the pastures can help as well.

Even with the animal health risks, it’s important that producers do not wait too long to start grazing once their pastures have greened up and grasses have developed their first three leaves, Anderson said, to take advantage of cool-season grasses. If producers allow the grass to get too tall, it’ll go to seed sooner and lose its feed value. So, he recommends that producers start grazing while the grass is shorter than six inches tall and to rotate fairly quickly through paddocks — as often as every 20 days. Otherwise, too much rest between grazing promotes stemmy plants, which are lower in feed value. If there are not enough animals to rotate paddocks this quickly, he recommends putting animals in each paddock, opening all the gates and using continuous grazing without rotation, or cutting the unused pasture for hay. Producers can then return to longer rest periods once the initial early growth has slowed.

Scouting Fields For Pests Should Begin Earlier This Year Due To Warm Winter

BROOKINGS — Predicting how the warm winter will affect populations of pests this year is not easy, says Ada Szczepaniec, South Dakota State University Assistant Professor and SDSU Extension Entomologist.

“It depends largely on particular pest species and their biology,” Szczepaniec said. “For example, insects that overwinter above ground are more likely to be affected by warmer winter weather than insects that overwinter below ground, where temperatures do not fluctuate as much.”

Szczepaniec adds that insects develop based on temperature, and will become active earlier if temperatures are significantly warmer during winter and spring months. However, if there is no source of food or large temperature swings occur after insects break dormancy, they will likely incur high rates of mortality and may not become any greater threat to the crops than any other year.

“One thing is certain, however, scouting should start early this year, and we should monitor closely what pests are reported in

the southern portions of the state as the migrating pests come in,” Szczepaniec said.

Specific insects Szczepaniec says growers should monitor their fields for include; alfalfa weevils, cutworms, blister beetles, wheat aphids and grasshoppers. “Cutworms, particularly in the northwestern part of the state, may become active soon, if they have not shown up in fields already. Jonathan Nixon, SDSU Extension Entomology Field Specialist with the Rapid City Regional Extension Center reported that grasshopper populations have been unusually high for this time of year in the western parts of South Dakota. Because larvae of blister beetles feed on grasshopper eggs this will mean greater numbers of blister beetles in alfalfa fields,” she said. “In the coming weeks, scouting for wheat aphids should also intensify, as they are likely to start to infest fields in early to mid-May this year.”

Visit [iGrow.org](http://www.iGrow.org) each week to view the latest crop production updates. Contact information for local SDSU Extension staff can be found at <http://www.iGrow.org/about>.

ADA SZCZEPANIEC

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Landowners Hit By Flood Are Eligible For Wetlands Assistance

South Dakota and Nebraska landowners affected by 2011 Missouri River flooding may be eligible for wetland restoration assistance from the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) through a five-state project sponsored by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and The Nature Conservancy.

Deadline to apply for this assistance is May 4.

Farmers along the Missouri River basically from the Fort Randall dam to the South Dakota/Nebraska state line with areas flooded during the 2011 Missouri River flood and eligible land within 1,000 meters of the Missouri River may apply to restore wetlands on their land through permanent or 30 year easements. Tribal land may also be offered for a 30-year contract. A map of eligible areas is available at www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov or local NRCS field offices.

In Nebraska, landowners in Boyd, Knox, Cedar, Dixon, Dakota, Thurston, Burt, Washington, Douglas, Sarpy, Cass, Otoe, Nemaha and Richardson counties with areas that flooded during the 2011 Missouri River flood, and eligible land within 1,000 meters of the Missouri River, may apply to restore wetlands on their land through 30 year or permanent easements. A map of

eligible areas is available at www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov.

“Much of the farmland along the Missouri River was damaged by scouring and sand deposition,” said Craig Derickson, state conservationist with NRCS in Lincoln, Neb. “The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program provides economic options for flood-impacted agricultural landowners. The resulting wetlands will also offset costs of future floods while providing valuable water quality and wildlife habitat benefits.”

Nearly \$3 million is available for easements and restoration costs to landowners in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and South Dakota, said Derickson. The Nature Conservancy is providing a five percent cash match of the restoration costs

for key restoration practices.

WREP is a voluntary program carried out through partnership agreements with state and local governments, non-governmental organizations and Indian tribes. It is a component of the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Landowners participating in WREP retain ownership and access to the land, and may be able to generate income from grazing, haying or recreation approved by NRCS.

Landowners may apply at their local NRCS office (find your nearest NRCS service center at <http://go.usa.gov/yBfI>). Learn more about WREP at <http://go.usa.gov/m24> and find out about other NRCS programs and initiatives at <http://go.usa.gov/m22>.

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