Soft Winter Wheat

Overview of the 2013 wheat season

For the 2013 season, Michigan wheat growers planted an estimated 630,000 acres and harvested some 600,000 acres (MI NASS). This is nearly 10 percent higher than the previous year. The Michigan (MI) office of NASS has estimated the crop to have yielded 75 bushels/acre, one bushel below last year's record 76 bushels.

Crop development:

Wheat fields sustained damage during February and March, particularly throughout the central portion of the state. The loss was due to persistent pockets of flooding and ice-sheeting following repeated swings in freezing and thawing temperatures. Ultimately, several thousand acres were abandoned throughout the mid-section of the state. This same central region was assaulted by 2 to 5 inches of rainfall during the second week of April causing further injury and some loss of nitrogen where fertilizer was applied earlier in the spring.

Due to the excessive rainfall coupled with cool weather, the injured wheat was not able to green-up and initiate new growth until mid-April (a striking contrast to the previous year when significant regrowth had already occurred by early March). The delay, particularly in the central region, seemed to prompt wheat to accelerate its development during the vegetative stages at the expense of stalk strength, which eventually led to significant lodging. Additional evidence of accelerated development was exhibited by some tillers where the number of leaves above the first joint was reduced from four to three.

Wet conditions delayed harvest in the southern tier of counties, along with much of northern Ohio, until the week of July 7. Later in this week, many growers in central MI and Saginaw valley were also able to harvest. During the week of July 14, hot and dry weather led to aggressive harvest for most of the state's remaining wheat-dense regions. In later maturing areas, poor weather hampered harvest progress. These areas tended to sustain the greatest quality losses relative to falling number and DON levels.

Diseases:

For the most part, foliar diseases were not of concern throughout the vegetative stages. However, following flowering, Septoria leaf blotch aggressively advanced up the plants and, in untreated susceptible varieties, infected much of the flag leaf. At this time, traces of Tan spot, Striped rust and Leaf rust could also be found.

Throughout the central region of the state, Fusarium head blight (scab) was a concern, particularly in the central belt extending from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron. Here, some elavators were finding 10 to 20 percent of the delivered wheat to have excessively high DON levels. Perhaps the greatest incidence and severity of DON was where harvest was delayed in parts of the Thumb region.

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Insect pests:

Insect pests were not a significant threat to wheat during the 2013 season. Adult armyworm moths were at very low numbers according to trap catches of the Michigan Wheat Watchers and no significant out-breaks of larvae were reported. Aphid numbers were also low this season and, consequently, infection from barley yellow mosaic virus was not nearly as common as in 2012.

Grain quality:

Overall, the industry might consider the state's crop worthy of a "fair"rating. Once again, the largest detriment to quality was DON levels due to Fusarium head scab. However, some also reported overly low falling numbers, particularly in the far northern and southern counties, and in late harvested wheat in the Thumb region. Relative to DON and falling number levels, Michigan's soft red wheat was discounted as much (or more) as its soft white crop. Test weights were mostly adequate, but below 2012 levels.

Grain prices:

The greatest opportunity for pricing 2013 wheat came immediately following the 2012 harvest when forward contract pricing placed wheat above $7.50 per bushel. At harvest, the cash price hung around $6.25 for soft red wheat (the actual price received by farmers will likely prove significantly lower than this as deductions for DON and falling number scores eroded the value). Subsequent to harvest, cash prices continually slipped so that by the end of the 2013 calendar year, many MI elevators were offering around $6.60 for soft red with a $0.20 to $0.40 premium for soft white wheat.

At year's end, the bid for the 2014 crop from most country elevators was between $5.65 and $6.00 for soft red wheat. This represents a negative $0.20 to 0.55 basis and equates to 1.45 percent the value of new-crop corn. The premium offered for white wheat is in the neighborhood of $0.35 per bushel.

2014 season

The acreage planted to wheat in MI during the fall of 2013 was estimated to be 670,000 acres (NASS, January, 2014). While some growers were encouraged to grow wheat due to a weakening corn market, some found it difficult to plant wheat because of a delay in dry-down of the preceding soybean crop. Perhaps a third of the crop was planted by the end of the first week of October. These timely seedings emerged quickly and evenly. However, wheat planted after this tended to emergence particularly slowly due to cool air and soil temperatures. A few growers elected not to seed all their intended acreage as the calendar neared November.

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