

Snow Benefits Wheat Crop

Several inches of snow falling upon much of Kansas the last few weeks has caused heartache for many a Kansan, but are a blessing for wheat farmers.

Between the two winter storms, snowfall totals ranged from more than 24-inches in south central Kansas and eastern Kansas, to six-inches in southwest Kansas and nearly a foot in northwest and north central Kansas.

"At this point, for the wheat crop any moisture is good moisture," says Jim Shroyer, Extension agronomist for Kansas State University.

The snowfall - with actual precipitation amounts ranging from one-quarter to more than two-inches throughout the state - will help offset the extremely dry conditions many farmers planted into last fall. Some farmers at January's "Cover Your Acres" conference in Oberlin told the agronomist that the last time they saw wheat was when they dumped it in the drill last fall and they haven't seen any wheat since.

Dry conditions are nothing new. In 2011, there was very little surface moisture, but there was subsoil moisture a few inches down to keep the wheat alive until spring rains fell. For the 2013 crop however, there is little topsoil or subsoil moisture available to the wheat crop. According to Kansas Ag Statistics, moisture in about 70% of the state's topsoils is short to very short. Thus, the snow has been a blessing. "It's hard to grow a wheat crop when there's no moisture," he says.

Prior to the winter storms in February, the state of Kansas had experienced up-and-down temperatures. Fluctuating temperatures throughout the winter have been less of a concern for the agronomist than the lack of precipitation. Daytime temperatures can be mild, as long as nighttime temperatures drop below the freezing mark.

"When the daytime temperatures are greater than 60 or 70 degrees, and nighttime temperatures don't get close to freezing, I get a little worried - especially if it is too early in the year. In the middle of February, that's not a good thing to have," he says. In this case, the wheat crop begins to lose its winterhardiness.

Shroyer harkens back to 1989, when an 85 degree day in January gave way to single digits with below zero wind chill the next. "That killed wheat, because the wheat had broken dormancy early," he recalls. "Ideally, we would have a gradual increase in temperature over time. But that doesn't often happen in Kansas."

Shroyer says that despite the challenges, there are areas of Kansas that appear to have a good crop thus far. Central, eastern, north central and south central Kansas has good yield potential at this point.

He is loathe to make any predictions at this point; even poor stands can be helped with the right temperature and the right amount of precipitation.

"Me prognosticating from this point on is pointless," he says. "If it is above normal temperatures from this point on, yields will be hurt. However, if we get average to below normal temperatures, and we have good wheat stands, we could have a respectable crop. Temperatures are the teller."