

Drought Watches, Warnings Have Farmers Concerned

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state, normal yields of 120-130 bushels per acre may fall from a third to a half to perhaps 75 bushels per acre or less because of the dry weather, according to Greg Roth, associate professor of agronomy at Penn State. The Penn State corn specialist said late planted corn will be most severely affected, and farmers should be concerned.

Roth said that some farmers are harvesting corn for silage too late when the corn is far too dry. He said he has heard of "silo fires occurring because corn was too dry" in Lebanon and Lancaster counties as a result of not enough moisture to ensile properly.

While Lancaster and southeastern counties have nearly completed corn silage harvest because of the dry weather, northern counties are just beginning their harvest.

"The best thing to do is to perform a moisture test on the crop," said Roth.

Rather than using common methods of observing and getting a feel for when the crop may be ready, it's best for farmers to conduct the test. Chopped silage is placed on a paper plate, placed in a microwave, and dried to the point where the weight stabilizes. A measurement is taken from start to finish weight to determine moisture content.

Another way to test for moisture is to use a Koster-like tester, a countertop unit that is essentially "a hairdryer with a basket," said Mark Madden, agronomy agent in Bradford County.

This week, Madden said that he conducted a moisture test at a dairy farm in Montrose, Susquehanna County. In Bradford and Susquehanna counties, corn silage harvest is two weeks ahead of schedule.

In a dry year, said the agronomy agent, "normal rules of thumb should be put aside." Farmers need to be "out there, getting that moisture test," he said.

Although some parts received rain from a storm that passed

through about the third week in August, total rainfall for much of the area is less than a half inch.

According to the River Forecasting Center, Bradford County averaged only 1.3 inches of precipitation, 1.8 inches below normal for the month.

Madden said it is important for the farmer "to be in the fields and, using the moisture test, evaluate the moisture of the crop, not rely on feel or looking at it."

Joel Hunter, agronomy agent for Crawford and Erie counties, said the county also has been drought stressed, recording only a half inch of rain for some spots in August. Hunter said a typical August brings about 3 1/2 inches of rain. According to the River Forecasting Center, only 2.5 inches of rain fell for the county on average, down about 1.7 inches for the month.

Many agronomy agents agreed that totals were spotty and that some areas received welcome relief from timely thunderstorms and others did not.

Harvest, said Hunter, is "rolling now, and everything is that far accelerated" because of the continued hot, dry weather. Hunter said his office has received calls from producers who are worried about the mixed quality going into the harvest, where several fields, especially those that are deep and hold water, are greener than shallow planted fields.

But the biggest concern for Crawford and Erie counties has been the concern about forest fires. Woodlot owners have to carefully watch for signs of possible forest fire outbreaks. Hunter said that forestry department personnel have been regularly inspecting wooded areas.

Corn growth depends on growing degree days (GDDs), which have accelerated because of the hot weather. Growers should keep a watch on the milk line and do moisture checks before harvest.

Some corn has literally died on the stalk, according to Roth, and

will dry down fast, especially on shallower soils. The grain will still provide good feed value, but harvest time is critical.

Also, a big concern is the test weight. A good test weight per bushel of corn is 54-56 pounds, but in a dry year, kernel size and mass will shrink. Some will test at 50 pounds or less, depending on location.

Roth said that many farmers believe this is the driest August they've seen in 30 years. Mel Brown, Centre county agronomy agent, said that while the summer of '91 was droughty, rain fell in August that year to revive crops in the fall.

According to River Forecast Center records, Centre County received only 0.7 inch of rain on average in August, down 2.7 inches from normal for the month.

Especially hard hit are some alfalfa fields, which produced enough for three cuttings this year. "For many, there won't be a fourth cutting," said Brown.

Also, a big concern is the lack of an adequate supply of water for livestock. Brown said that in Rebersburg, Centre County, a farmer was concerned that his spring was drying up and was looking into finding another water supply for his cattle.

Many creeks have dried up to the point of being useless as a

supply. Also, concern about shallow wells has risen — though most counties so far have reported few problems with water supplies from deeply drilled wells.

A challenge livestock producers face, according to Brown, is the hot weather, which increases water usage for livestock. On Thursday, a cold front was scheduled to bring scattered but possibly heavy rainfall to many locations in the state, bringing cooler weather by Saturday. Brown said that cooler weather would reduce water usage by livestock.

Soybean crops have also been hard hit by the dry weather, especially those planted late following barley or wheat, according to Walt Wurster, agronomy agent for Chester County. The county is also under a drought warning, less severe than the drought emergency declared for many counties in the summer of 1991.

For many soybean growers that planted early, running the combines through "will be enough to pay the cost of harvesting," said Wurster. The beans will be smaller, which means adjustments are needed before harvesting.

In a normal year, 60 bushels of soybeans or more are possible in some Chester County fields. However, this year, there could be a 50 percent reduction in yields to about 40 bushels or less. Depending on

the condition of the crop, late beans may not "yield anything" and would have to be plowed down, according to Wurster.

Some farmers have had to drill new wells in the county, but Wurster has had few calls regarding residential use worries.

Are there any positive aspects to this drought?

It proves you cannot harvest by calendar or guesswork. But for those who want to do some fall tillage, conditions are ripe, and the ground could be worked with a chisel as dry as it is, according to Joel Hunter, Crawford County agent.

Also, some fall grains could get planted and would do well if timely rains would arrive mid-month.

Another positive side is that the price of corn could rise as a result, perhaps to \$3 a bushel, depending on overall harvest, according to Walt Wurster, Chester County agent.

Mel Brown, Centre County agent, said that he spoke with his 87 year-old father the past weekend. He said that there was a saying, that if you get little moisture in summertime, there won't be much in the wintertime, either.

But for now, farmers need to be out in the fields, monitoring grain and silage moisture to see when they should harvest their crops, according to Roth.

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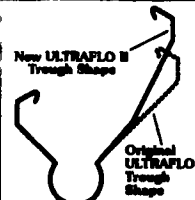
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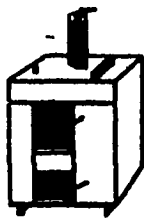
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