

Rains Blessing To Ohio Crop, Low Prices Aren't

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Rain the weekend of May 21 helped Ohio's recently planted crops get off to a good start, although projected low commodity prices due to the nation's high grain surpluses won't be much of a reward for farmers.

"We expect another year of low prices," said Carl Zulauf, agricultural economist at Ohio State University. "The impact on farmers is that this will be the second (consecutive) year of low farm income. "It is most people's opinion that most farmers who are highly

leveraged can easily stand one year of falling income," Zulauf said. "It's when you put two or more years of lower income together that financial strain becomes more widespread."

An otherwise dry spring allowed Ohio farmers to get virtually all their corn and soybeans planted two weeks ahead of time, said Ohio State crop specialists. A continued dry spell would have damaged what could become an outstanding crop year, they said.

"We sort of had it pretty nice this spring in getting crops planted," said agronomist Jim Beuerlein. "A lot of seed got planted in fairly dry soil, and it just laid there waiting for water."

"There are some fields with thin stands now, but the recent rains will correct that," Beuerlein said.

Ohio and Indiana are well ahead of the nation's major soybean-growing area in the Western Corn Belt, where planting is lagging due to rain, Zulauf said. Illinois is the exception, where planting is right on target.

However, it's still not too late for western farmers to get their soybeans planted in time, if the weather starts to cooperate. Favorable growing conditions could add to the nation's already high stockpile of soybeans.

U.S. soybean producers also face competition from overseas

oilseed growing areas, where improved weather conditions are expected to raise production, Zulauf said. In particular, Malaysia's palm oil production is expected to return to normal after sustaining drought from the El Nino weather pattern, he said.

Meanwhile, last weekend's showers in Ohio didn't seem to be evenly distributed, leaving some fields still thirsty for water. Dennis Baker, an agriculture/community development agent for Ohio State University Extension in Darke County, said "Any amount of rain would help" but the weekend's showers were spotty and sparse in the west-central Ohio county.

In Wood County, an Ohio State research branch received almost an inch of rainfall last weekend, while some nearby areas received about two inches, said Paul Houdashelt, manager of the Northwestern branch of Ohio State's Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC). "It was highly variable up here," Houdashelt said. "There are some portions of the area that are excess in moisture, and other areas that are adequate."

OARDC's Northwestern Branch received 1.22 inches of precipitation for the month as of May 23, compared to 5.26 inches for May 1998. April brought 5.7 inches of precipitation compared

to 3.47 inches in April 1998.

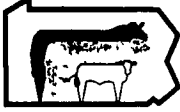
Farmers usually finish corn planting and are well into planting soybeans by late May. This year, some corn is as high as 3-4 inches in northwestern Ohio, while soybeans are just starting to emerge from the ground, Houdashelt said.

"We were concerned about how the dry weather was going to affect corn stands," said agronomist Peter Thomison. "If we can get some more rain it wouldn't hurt us any."

Young plants not only need moisture to help them grow, but rain also washes herbicides into soils to be effective on weeds. Beuerlein said that relatively cool temperatures helped keep weed population down while farmers waited for rain.

Ohio's wheat crop is looking "excellent," said plant pathologist Pat Lipps. There is some concern that rainfall could spread a fungal disease known as head scab, which caused major losses in 1995 and 1996, he said. However, the dry conditions over the past month has probably prevented the scab fungus from producing spores, which should limit the number of infections this year.

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When low milk cows are kept past breakeven (generally 45 to 60 pounds) or health-compromised cows are kept until they are overtly biologically broken, they begin to incur double losses for the dairy. The cows aren't putting income back into the operation. They're taking up space that a more productive animal could be using, and at the same time they are becoming less valuable as beef animals.

Even the healthy appearing low-milk cow can quickly lose value as she gains weight instead of making milk with the energy she consumes. The per pound beef value diminishes rapidly as cows approach BCS scores of 4 and 5.

"With our cows, we've mainly learned not to hold heavier ani-

mals quite as long," said Jett Grove. Jeff and his brother Jay milk 175 cows on their farm near Shippensburg. He's been paying attention to why cull cows bring the prices they do.

The failure to evaluate is costly. Dairy farmers can benefit when they approach their culling decisions as a positive, productive, and profitable function of dairy management — and view themselves as contributors of valued food products instead of salvage price-takers.

The Regional Center for Dairy Beef Quality Assurance is dedicated to raising producer awareness of key management and decision factors affecting consumer confidence, beef value and dairy profitability. To learn more about dairy beef quality assurance, contact Tammy Weaver at (717) 939-7000.

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