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Market snapshot

Barchart.com		
May Futures		
Wheat	810-2s	-6.6
KC Wheat	910-0s	-2.0
Corn	735-4s	+4.4
Soybeans	1375-2s	+10.4
Oats	389-4s	+8.4
Ethanol	2.582s	+0.016
Lx Cattle (April)	113.600s	-1.050
Lean Hogs	97.300s	-0.800
Pork Bellies	108.700s	0.000

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Snapshot as of previous day. [Click here for current info](#)

Hutchinson, KS

Get the 10 day forecast

48° F
Sunny
Feels Like: 44° F
Humidity: 56%
Wind: ENE at 9 mph
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Plant Dryland Corn or Milo?

Ag Blogs - Vance Ehmke
Thursday, 24 February 2011 15:17



Wheat and More...or less

OK, tell me again why we're supposed to plant corn over grain sorghum.

If you look at what's going on out in the country in recent years, farmers are looking more and more seriously at corn over grain sorghum. That's also been the case for the past 40 years. US grain sorghum acreage peaked in the early '70s at 20 to 22 million acres. In recent years, the acreage has slowly eroded to only about 7 million acres nationwide. Of course, most of this is grown in the central and southern Plains with Kansas and Texas being the big producers.

There are some reasons for our infatuation with corn. For what it's worth, it is a sexier crop. Beyond that, some farmers like planting a mix of both corn and sorghum because it allows them to get expensive planting and harvesting equipment over more acres on a timely basis. That does make sense. In addition, as you go north and west, corn may have an advantage in getting to maturity on time.

Too, with Roundup Ready corn hybrids, there are some advantages with weed control options and costs. However, this advantage is losing some steam because a growing number of weeds are developing resistance to the popular herbicide. And while corn herbicide programs may have some cost advantage, a lot of that is eaten up by higher priced seed.

But in talking recently with Kansas State University researcher Alan Schlegel at the Tribune Experiment Station, he expressed some confusion as to why farmers in Greeley County, Kan., for instance, are planting so much corn. Out there, half of their summer row crops is going to corn while the other half is going to milo.

Take a look at this data and you'll understand his confusion. For the past 4 years, he's been running a study which, among things, compares yields of no-till corn to no-till grain sorghum. Guess what? Milo kicks butt. Over the course of the study, sorghum literally clobbers corn with a 17-bushel per acre yield advantage. With a sorghum price of just \$3/bu., that's a \$50/acre advantage. If you're planting 1000 acres of sorghum, you'll gross an additional \$50,000!

And at a more current price of \$5 to \$6/bu., sorghum's advantage is \$85 to \$100/acre. On that same 1000 acres, you're now grossing an additional \$85,000 to \$100,000.

Some farmers say they plant corn because in the really good year, it'll have a higher yield peak. Sorry. The data say something else. In the super optimum years, sorghum and corn do equally as well.

One thing I have noticed, though, is with certain farmers, corn is the crop of choice in the really bad years—because it dies so well. They don't like grain sorghum because it really does have much better drought tolerance. It'll hang on and hang on and hang on while corn just gives up.

These farmers openly promote corn for dire conditions because it makes their crop insurance plans and returns work so much better. But honestly, guys, I don't think this is how we want to present our industry to the public. Planned failure really does not look good—especially to a skeptical public who has always struggled to understand farm subsidies and crop insurance subsidies.

And while we keep hearing about drought tolerant corn, my recent reading on that says to expect something only on the order of an initial 5% yield increase. With an 80-bushel crop, that's just a 4-bushel per acre yield increase—which falls well short of the 17-bushel yield advantage sorghum has over corn.

Another thing of great interest to me is the price of corn and sorghum seed. Earlier this winter a seed company came by inquiring about us selling their row crop seed. I asked how much a farmer-seed dealer

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would make selling corn and milo. With milo, the dealer would make \$5 or \$7/bag, but with corn it was more like \$20/bag....up to \$50/bag depending on the hybrid. Wow! Talk about motive!

However, this could present an interesting ethical dilemma. Do we sell lower yielding corn to farmers and make more money for ourselves, or cut our seed profits by selling more sorghum seed?

Another thing about grain sorghum is the crop is so forgiving. You can get very respectable yields with even a wide range in seeding rate, for instance, because the crop will do such a good job of compensating by putting out more tillers if needed. Corn, on the other hand, is very sensitive to seeding rate. If the stand isn't there, you will pay.

Putting all these things together, what are you going to do? I hate to sound mercenary, but here on our farm, we really are interested in making money. And that's why we're planting grain sorghum.

Vance Ehmke and his wife, Louise, farm in Lane County. The operation includes raising certified seed wheat.

Comments (1)

interesting read

1. Saturday, 26 February 2011 10:41
(*Kans resident*)

This is an interesting view of an issue I had no idea was happening.

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- Re: Converting Grain Silos into a home
- how bad is it?
- National article
- Hi Vance,

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