Most crops fared well this year

Many farms were truly blessed this year in Hancock County with good to excellent yields for all three major crops. Even though the weather threatened at times to become too dry, too hot, too wet, or too stormy, in the end it provided adequate and timely rains for most fields.

Even late-planted corn and soybeans, and double-crop soybeans, yielded beyond expectations as a result of adequate rainfall and above-normal temperatures in August through October.

The absence of disease pressure early in the growing season also improved crop yields.

Fall conditions allowed most farmers to get their crops harvested before the wet November conditions moved into the area.

Still, raising a crop is a challenge every year. Farmers in the southeastern and southern edge of the county had to deal with too much early rain, which caused delayed corn planting, a switch to soybeans, or in some cases, inability to plant.

The northwestern part of the county had abnormally dry conditions early in the season. Most of the corn in the county was planted in May because of a record cold April. However, abnormally warm temperatures in May got corn off to a good start.

Conditions allowed corn to become well established early in the season and develop a strong and healthy root system.

The early-planted corn pollinated shortly after the Fourth of July. The later corn fit the statement, "knee high by the Fourth of July."

Even though there were many hot days in July, pollination was not a problem for the early or late-planted corn because soil moisture was adequate, and the relative humidity remained high throughout the day and night.

Corn yields have been excellent in many fields. It is common to hear farmers talk about fields yielding over 200 bushels per acre.

Corn yields should be much better than the 170-bushel county average for last year, and above the five-year average of 166.

The record average of 193 bushels an acre from 2014 may not be broken, but it is a possibility.

The soybean crop may be a record for Hancock County.

At times during the harvest, local elevators were at full capacity and unable to take more beans. Farmers had to delay bean harvest until space became available. During those times, farmers switched to harvesting corn.

Like corn, there were early and late-planted soybean fields because of heavy rains in some parts of the county. Some of these areas had stand losses from localized flooding along streams and ditches. However, soybean plants that survived adjusted with more branches and yield losses were minimal.

The abundance and the timing of August rains allowed soybean plants to produce more flowers, set more pods, and make larger beans.

Each year, farmers would like to see the county soybean yield average be above 50 bushels an acre. They have reached that goal only twice: 2011 and 2014.

The record was reached in 2014 at 54.2 bushels per acre. This year, the soybean yield average should be above 50 bushels, and it is possible that farmers may break the 2014 record.

The county average in 2017 was 48.5 bushels. The five-year county average for soybeans is 48.9 bushels per acre.

Farmers will need all the extra bushels they can get to offset the dropping soybean grain prices. Soybean prices have been heavily affected by tariffs in the trade war with China, as well as a record-breaking bean harvest across the country.

Tariffs alone account for at least a $1.50 drop per bushel in the soybean price. The federal government has established some tariff relief on soybean prices, but it is only for 50 percent of the crop.

Locally, some farmers also may have received less for their soybeans because of grain quality. In some fields beans were damaged by feeding by stink bugs and possibly by bean leaf beetles.

Besides direct damage, insect feeding allowed an avenue for mold to enter pods and damage beans. Shriveled and discolored beans were evidence of this damage, which was greater this year than normal.

Wheat yields were good this year. For the third year in a row, wheat yields were above average.

Many fields were in the upper 70s in bushels per acre, and it was not unheard of for some fields to yield over 90 bushels.

Lack of disease was the major reason for good wheat yields. However, abnormal hot June temperatures may have reduced wheat yields as much as 10 bushels in many fields.

Temperatures over 90 may have caused the plants to mature and die sooner, reducing the time that plants can move carbohydrates and protein into the grain.

More wheat may be planted in the county this fall. With corn and soybean prices dropping across the country, wheat has become more economically competitive with other crops.

However, the later soybean harvest in the region may affect the number of wheat acres planted in the county.

Generally, wheat is planted after the soybean harvest. Ideally, farmers would like to see wheat planted no later than the first part of October for large yields. In many situations, soybeans were harvested the latter part of October. Thus, some wheat fields were planted late or not at all.

Most of the crops have been harvested in the area. Yields have been good in most fields. Farmers will need the extra bushels because grain prices have continued to be low for another year. Unfortunately, grain farmers will see another year of financial stress.

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