Major agriculture events of 2018

Each year is different for agriculture, mainly because of weather and markets. Pests such as weeds can also be a challenge.

However, as seen in 2018, government may be the biggest challenge for farmers.

I have listed eight events that affected agriculture last year, but not in any particular order.

Weather and crop yields.

Weather was ideal early in the growing season for large corn yields in many fields. Timely rains in August also allowed large yields in soybeans.

However, poor field conditions in November prevented harvesting in some parts of the county. Some of these fields are still not harvested, but most of the delayed fields were finished in December.

Hancock County yields will still be very good, but these late-harvested fields may prevent the county from setting a record average yield.

Grain prices.

Grain prices have continued to trend lower since 2013. Soybeans, the main Hancock County crop, saw a significant drop in price as a result of the tariff conflict with China.

Soybeans have been a major factor in causing farm income to decline the past five years for Ohio and the nation.

According to Ohio State University’s Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics, the cost of producing grain in Ohio is expected to increase in 2019 because of higher fertilizer, seed, machinery and energy costs. Profits for the coming year are expected to be low to negative.

Farmers, in many situations, have had to look for other income sources to stay solvent, such as off-farm jobs. Lower farm income has also affected businesses that supply farm operations. Land prices are expected to drop because of the uncertainty of grain prices and interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve.

China’s retaliatory trade tariff.

On July 6 last year, China imposed a retaliatory tariff against President Trump’s 25 percent tariff on Chinese goods.

Before the tariff, China was the largest market for U.S. soybeans. In 2017, China imported 31 percent of the beans produced in the U.S., and according to the American Soybean Association, that accounted for 60 percent of total U.S. exports and nearly one in three rows of harvested beans from a farmer’s field. The result of the tariff halted the sale of U.S. soybeans to China and caused bean prices to plummet.

Farmers saw a nearly 20 percent drop in soybean prices as a result of the tariff. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has offset some of these losses with the Market Facilitation Program, which provides direct payments to soybean growers for losses caused by the tariff.

Water hemp continues to spread.

More fields in Hancock County have serious infestations of water hemp and one field is being watched for an infestation of Palmer amaranth, caused by contaminated cover crop seed.

Farmers need to hand-remove any plants that escape a regular weed management program. One female plant can produce 500,000 seeds. In three years, leaving one plant can create an infestation that is difficult to control, and may cause a 35 to 50 percent yield reduction.

Ag mergers.

Mergers continue among the large agricultural companies. Farmers are concerned that these large mergers will reduce competition and result in higher seed and chemical costs.

Corteva became the new name for the Agriculture Division of the Dow-Dupont merger. Corteva dropped several seed brand names but kept the flagship, Pioneer.

Nutrien Ag Solutions became the new name of the merger of Agrim Ltd. and Potash Corp., which also changed the name of local retailer CPS to Nutrien Ag Solutions.

Bayer buying Monsanto was the big story. As the acquisition continues, the Monsanto name will disappear. With the departure of the Monsanto name, environmental activists will have to find a new scapegoat.

New farm bill aka Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018.

Two unusual events occurred with the passing of the farm bill: 1. Compromise was reached on disagreements over work requirements for food assistance, and dollars for conservation programs. 2. A new farm bill was passed in the same year the previous farm bill expired.

In years past, farm bills were given many extensions while political entities bargained over future federal agricultural policies. It has been about 15 years (2002) since a farm bill was passed without giving an extension to the previous one.

Many similarities exist between the 2014 and 2018 farm bills. However, one change that will get press time is the federal legalization of hemp production. Hemp is in the cannabis family but very low in THC (a chemical in marijuana). Hemp fibers are used in construction, clothing, automobiles, and other industrial products.

Do not expect the sight of hemp fields in Ohio anytime soon. The farm bill gives priority to states establishing laws for hemp production. Current Ohio law makes it illegal to grow hemp. However, expect to see hemp production in other state, such as Kentucky, which have already established guidelines for hemp.

Algae blooms in Lake Erie.

Bloom was not an issue on the lake in 2018. However, since the Toledo water crisis in 2015, political groups have been looking for something to blame, and agriculture still appears to be the target.

In July, Ohio’s former governor issued an executive order to declare eight watersheds in northwestern Ohio as distressed, including the Blanchard River and Eagle Creek. The order has been on hold as various committees debate its merits and legalities of the regulatory process.

Heidelberg University Water Quality Laboratory reported in a summer presentation that current practices have not reduced the amount of dissolved reactive phosphorus in nearby lakes. They suggested three possibilities as the cause. 1. There has been not enough time to see the benefit of conservation practices. 2. Additional regulations need to be put in place. 3. The source of the phosphorus has not been identified and the typical agriculture field may not be the problem. The Water Quality Laboratory supports the “not enough time” option.

Flood mitigation. A positive note for the year, progress on flood control for the Blanchard River in Findlay. Viable solutions occurred once representatives from the rural community and Findlay businesses agreed to work together for answers, a model that Toledo and the agriculture community should consider.

The decision to drop the “diversion channel” and floodwater storage basins, and try benches on the river first should save farmland and costs.

Farmers have supported projects that diminish the potential for loss of cropland, disruption of rural homes and families, flooding of new crop areas, and damage to the rural transportation infrastructure.

Many of these events and issues will continue to affect farmers in 2019. One cannot predict the season until the harvest. Who knows, maybe the tariff battles will soon end and soybean prices will rebound.

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