Farmers deal with choices made during wet and wild grow season

As you drive through the country, you may still find a few fields of corn waiting for harvest. But for the most part, the 2019 crop year is finished and the harvest is over.

It has been a tough year for the grain farmer. The 2019 growing season opened like a Shakespearean tragedy, but instead of Hamlet asking the question “To Be or Not To Be,” it was the farmer asking “To Plant or Not to Plant.”

Record days of rainfall and saturated fields kept most farmers from planting in April or May. Farmers, with crop insurance, were able to take an option called prevented planting, if the weather had not allowed them to plant corn by June 5. Most of the area corn fields were not planted by June 5.

Prevented planting, or choosing not to plant, would provide the farmer only 55% of the value of the corn crop from a normal year. Farmers had to decide by June 6 whether to take the prevented planting or take a chance that their corn crop would succeed even with a mid-June or later planting.

It has been estimated that at least 60% of the corn acres in the county were not planted and turned in to insurance as prevented planting acres. Farmers also switched additional fields that were originally intended for corn to soybeans. As a result, Hancock County will most likely have a record low of planted acres to corn this year.

For those who made the decision to plant corn anyway, it must have felt like a football team that was looking forward to a great season but lost their All-American quarterback to injury before the first game and now were uncertain about the rest of the season.

There was no room for error and future weather events had to be perfect for the crop to mature in time. These weather events included moderate temperatures in midsummer to ensure good pollination and seed set, adequate moisture in August for kernel development and a later-than-normal killing frost date for the grain to reach maturity.

It turned out that providence was kind to many corn farmers. The perfect weather events occurred.

Temperatures were moderate during pollination, adequate to abundant rainfall occurred in August, above normal temperatures in September and early October hastened maturity, periods of dry fall conditions assisted harvest and field activities, and the killing frost date was almost Nov. 1 rather than Oct. 10.

Back in June at planting, farmers were hoping they could get at least 140 to 150 bushels per acre. Many did much better, some even breaking 200 bushels. However, county yields are most likely inflated since only the most productive fields with good drainage were planted to corn this year.

Also the southern third of the county was dry in August, which reduced yields in these fields. Thus the county yields will be below the 2018 average of 184 bushels but near the ten year average of 165. However, with the large reduction of planted acres, overall corn production for the county will be one of the lowest in the past two decades.

The soybean crop was the big surprise for the area. Like corn, soybeans were planted late because of wet fields. However, soybeans do not need as long of a season to mature compared to corn. Farmers are also comfortable with late planted beans since they may double crop and plant soybeans after wheat harvest the end of June.

Prevented planting was also a crop insurance option for soybean. However, this option has a later date than corn, accounting for the shorter growing season. The prevented planting date for beans in our area was June 20. It was estimated that 25% of the intended soybean acres were claimed prevented planting.

Another factor that affected the farmers’ decision was the inability to return soybean seed like they can corn, so they were stuck with the seed. Soybean seed viability does not carry over well into the next year, so if they had already purchased seed they might as well plant it.

Soybean also has the ability to produce more flowers and pods during the growing season, unlike corn which only flowers once. Thus if a farmer has a respectable stand, soybeans can adjust to weather events until about mid to late-August. Rain events in late July through August generally determine yield levels in soybeans.

Historically though, an early planting date will produce beans with the largest yields since the plant has a longer period to produce more leaves and nodes for flowers. Generally, beans planted in late June will yield around 40 bushels per acre if weather conditions are good, but they may yield less than 10 bushels if conditions are dry in August.

Thus the farmer was hoping to get, at best, 40 to 45 bushels per acre from their late planted soybeans. However, yields in many fields were between 50 and 60 bushels. The larger than expected yields were attributed to timely and adequate rain events in late July and August and improved soybean genetics.

However, yields were lower in southern Hancock County, which did not get adequate and timely rains in August. Also, some beans were planted late enough that they did not mature before the first killing frost.

Thus, county yield averages will most likely be in the mid to upper 40s — close to the historic county yield average but much lower than the record yield of 61 bushels per acre set in 2018.

Back to the question, “to plant or not to plant?” One farmer summarized it best with this observation: If you got the rain in August, it paid off to have planted the crop. If you didn’t get the rain, it paid off not to plant and take the prevented planting insurance option.

In summary, it was a difficult growing season for area farmers. Many fields stayed wet so late in the season that the farmer made the economical decision to not plant. The few fields that were planted often exceeded yield expectations for a late-planted crop.

In the end, all grain farmers took a financial loss for the cropping year. Insurance and government assistance will partially reduce some of the lost income. However, area farmers will need a successful 2020 crop to make up for this year’s losses.

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