



The Farming Outlook Is Cloudy At Best

By: Gene Prim

Farming is the same as every other business in at least one respect: whatever is for sure and 100 percent true today will be different tomorrow. The farming game has been a difficult business at best over the past few years as ag producers battle weather, low prices and some things that are totally out of their control.

In a "normal year," if there is such a thing, farmers would be making plans for getting back into the fields in early to mid-April. There is a fair amount of that planning going on right now but for many farmers there is another problem: there is the remainder of the 2019 crop that still needs to be dealt with.

For many, spring work of 2020 will begin with combining. There is a significant amount of the 2019 corn crop still remaining in the fields unharvested. That will need to be cleaned up before the land can be seeded for 2020.

The awful crop year of 2019 just never seems to let go. It was the worst crop year in most farmers' memories. A few of the older farmers may recall 1962 when a lot of land never got seeded at all. Many are wishing that was the case last year as it was a miserable year from start to finish and the finish, is not here yet for many growers.

The spring of 2019 took its sweet time about getting here at all. It was

went into May before fields shed frost and snow cover and dried out enough where machinery could actually work the fields. The crop was "muddled in" to cold ground between rain storms but eventually loaded into a waiting semi on dry ground, either a township road or headland in the field.

Wheat and soybean harvests were a big disappointment. Instead of big crops, the fields produced below average yields. Wheat yielding 40 bushels to the acre and soybeans running 25 bushels to the acre were common. There were some yields higher but not many. Everything that came out of the fields was wet and had to be dried before the bushels could be stored or sold. An added expense.

And then came the prolonged corn harvest. Farmers waited as long as they could but the corn was immature and wet, running in the low to mid 20 percent moisture range in many cases. Some farmers harvested the corn anyway and took the dockage for moisture or dried it down themselves.

Others waited for Mother Nature to work her magic. Many farmers gambled on freezing temperatures to knock some of the moisture out of the corn. A lot of corn in the immediate area was picked up in late November and early December and either sold or run through a dryer and stored.

In many cases the trucks could not get into the fields. The

combines went where they could and transferred soybeans over to hopper wagons pulled by tractors. Combines on tracks went where wheeled combines could not make it. The hopper wagons were eventually loaded into a waiting semi on dry ground, either a township road or headland in the field.

Wheat and soybean harvests were a big disappointment. Instead of big crops, the fields produced below average yields. Wheat yielding 40 bushels to the acre and soybeans running 25 bushels to the acre were common. There were some yields higher but not many. Everything that came out of the fields was wet and had to be dried before the bushels could be stored or sold. An added expense.

And then came the prolonged corn harvest. Farmers waited as long as they could but the corn was immature and wet, running in the low to mid 20 percent moisture range in many cases. Some farmers harvested the corn anyway and took the dockage for moisture or dried it down themselves.

Others waited for Mother Nature to work her magic. Many farmers gambled on freezing temperatures to knock some of the moisture out of the corn. A lot of corn in the immediate area was picked up in late November and early December and either sold or run through a dryer and stored.

The corn that was harvested did not meet the 200-bushel yields that had been common in 2017 and 2018. Most farmers considered themselves fortunate if they got 150 bushels to the acre corn. Much of that corn was light in weight after drying, resulting in further dockage. Some very immature corn was so light it was difficult to find a market for it.

Most of the farmers in the Barnesville, Rothsay, Baker, Sabin, Downer, Comstock and Wolverton areas got their corn off in December. But there are isolated fields in those areas and thousands of acres in the Breckenridge, Wahpeton and Richland County areas that did not harvest their corn due to the wet conditions. The same holds true for nearly all of the corn acres north of Highway 10.

The unharvested fields were an educated gamble by the growers. They hoped that the freezing temperatures would continue to drop the moisture content. The hope was that the cold temperatures would come and be welcomed.

It was also hoped that we would have less than an average amount of snowfall so winter combining could take place. Those hopes were dashed between Christmas and New Years of 2019 when we got an old fashioned blizzard that dumped a foot or more of snow across the region. That new snow came on top of several inches that were already on the ground. The corn fields were clogged with snow nearly as tall as the tassels on the corn. The deep snow made winter combining impossible. Those fields will not be harvested now until spring after the snow melts.

As bad as the corn, soybean and wheat harvests have been, they have been a picnic compared with sugarbeets. Wet fields defied harvest for many growers. Beet harvest equipment was towed through the fields by a tractor or several tractors. But even those assisted harvests were not enough to get to all of the beets.

Locally there were quite a few acres of beets that could not be harvested due to the mud. The factories even ran well past freeze up this year accepting frozen beets that could be processed immediately. But eventually that harvest was shut down by the factories.

While more local sugarbeet acres got harvested than did not, that was not the case when you got close to and across the Red River going west and it was even worse going north towards Grand Forks. Many growers in those areas never got a harvester into the fields due to the wet conditions. There are thousands and thousands of acres of sugarbeets



Midwest Bank President Dionne Merkens remains optimistic about the ag economy despite a rough crop year in 2019.

and potatoes that remain locked in Red River Valley mud until spring when they will rot in the fields.

Sugarbeet growers had insult added to injury this year as both Crystal and MinnDak plants imposed penalties for acres of beets that were not delivered to the factories. Growers that received only what insurance they carried on the sugarbeet crop now found themselves owing the factory between \$300 and \$450 per acre for unharvested beet acres.

Crop year 2019 is a year most growers want to put out of their minds and out of their memories. But it will simply not go away. There is still corn, whatever is left after the snow pulls it down and the deer don't eat, that still needs to be harvested. Most of the farmers with standing corn are hoping that we get a warm, mild, early spring so they can get standing corn off the field in time to plant a late crop of something.

The past year was disappointing for many local farmers. There are likely to be a few well-tanned faces missing from the local ag economy when tractor wheels start to turn in the spring of 2020. Farmers closing in on retirement age may just pull the pin a year or two earlier than had originally been planned before they dip too far into the equity they have built up in their land and machinery.

There will also be a likely exodus of some young farmers who do not have the years of experience built up to withstand these down markets and poor growing conditions. But in addition to conventional lending sources, young farmers have some very attractive programs available through the US Department of Agriculture. Many of those young farmers are also under the protective

wing provided by parents and grandparents as they begin their careers in agriculture.

Dionne Merkens, branch president of Midwest Bank of Barnesville, is optimistic about the future of farming and she shares her confidence in the local ag economy.

"While 2019 was a bad year for farmers, it could have been a whole lot worse," Merkens said. "The Market Facilitation Program Payments (MFP) in 2019 pulled a lot of farmers through and some of them even made a little money under some very trying conditions."

"The Market Facilitation Program Payments marketing facility program saw two payments going to farmers in 2019. The first payment was tied to mostly corn and sunflowers and had a stipulation based on the proven yields from 2018. The second round of Market Facilitation Program Payments payments applied to most crops," Merkens continued.

"Last year was a disappointing one for corn growers," Merkens said. "Many farmers have been trying to improve their yields by moving to longer maturity corn. It simply did not work in 2019. Beet farmers had a very tough year last season with a short crop, horrible growing and harvest conditions, weak prices and now payments due to the factory for undelivered acres of beets."

"Right now there are a lot of local beet stocks being offered for sale on the market. Many of those beet farmers bought those shares at a high price when they were offered for sale a few years ago. It's a bitter pill to swallow with the current market price. It's particularly tough if a farmer is looking at the end of his career and looking to liquidate. There are probably some real bargains out there for those in the sugarbeet game for the long haul," Merkens concluded.

Farming, as it has always been, is a cyclical business full of peaks and valleys. The year 2019 had to be one of the very deep valleys. But less than a decade ago, from 2010 through 2012, there were some banner years with big yields and high prices. Those days are likely to come again, but in the meantime, you have to get through the rough spots to get into a position to take advantage of the good years that have always followed these down markets.

With 2019 corn still in the field, corn at \$3.35 per bushel, soybeans at \$8.00 per bushel, wheat at \$4.85 for delivery next fall and a very uncertain market for sugarbeets, it's hard to be very optimistic about the upcoming 2020.

In other words, it's pretty much business as usual in the farming game.



The corn harvest of 2019 is a continuing odyssey. High moisture corn was left in a lot of areas hoping to have freezing temperatures drive some of the moisture out of the corn. Instead we got a food of snow between Christmas and New Year's that locked the crop in the field. What corn that is not pulled down by the snow or eaten by the deer will have to be harvested in the spring before the 2020 crop can be planted.



July 9-12, 2020

Fairgrounds Barnesville • Free Gate Every Day
mnclaycountyfair.com



* 4-H, FFA & Open Class Exhibits & Livestock Shows

* Free Stage Entertainment

* Mighty Thomas Carnival

* Learn by Doing Center

* Conservation Building

* Modified Tractor Pull Friday

* Demo Derby Saturday

* Ranch Rodeo Sunday



It was a rare sight last fall to see a sugar beet harvester and truck able to navigate a field without another tractor pulling it. There were thousands upon thousands of acres of beets that remained in the muddy fields at freeze up last fall.

2020
WMSTR

SEPTEMBER 4 - SEPTEMBER 7

Kids 14 & Under
FREE
\$14/day - \$25/season pass
\$45/4-day primitive camp_{ing}

Full & Miniature Steam Train Rides
Many Rare Steam & Gas Engines
Tractor Pull, Pony Brake & Plowing
Pioneer Ladies Exhibits & MORE!

OTTO EXPO

WESTERN MINNESOTA STEAM THRESHERS REUNION
Every LABOR DAY Weekend | Rollag, MN | www.rollag.com
@WMSTR
Rollag, MN | www.rollag.com