

Douglas County Agriculture Report for July 2022

Douglas County is in a moderate drought according to the National Centers for Environmental Information. The last good rain was the week of the 4th and the totals varied widely from that event. Our crops continue to grow. The corn seemed to jump a foot after that early July rain. Most of the corn is tasseling and the soybeans are blooming. We need more rain and cooler weather.

Dry weather when the corn was pollinating was a big problem in the past. The pollen-bearing tassel at the top of the plant would come out ahead of the ear shoot and be out of pollen before the silks on the ear shoot emerged. The varieties we plant now have much closer timing of these events so pollination

is more likely to be successful. An unfertilized silk continues to grow for some time. I remember drought years with 5-inch-long silks but no grain on the cob at harvest.

Soybeans have always had the reputation of being a more drought-resistant crop. Naturally, they do better with good rain. An Iowa State University article I found had the opinion that soybean breeders had been selecting for yield and need to look at drought-resistant varieties. Usually, a plant that has good defensive characteristics against drought will not hit a top yield even with good conditions and a high yield variety won't do well in a stressful environment. Most farmers will plant a mix of varieties to spread the

weather risk.

There are a couple of cautionary agriculture stories in the news. The president of the island nation of Sri Lanka decided last year that all crop production would be organic and banned all synthetic fertilizer and pesticide imports. The result was a catastrophe. The island was self-sufficient in rice, but the production fell as much as 39 percent after the ban. Production of the country's main export, tea fell 18 percent. They cannot feed themselves and have less income from tea export.

Sri Lanka's prime minister has been forced out of office. The president has fled the country, which is in economic collapse. Some of the articles I have read have downplayed the effect of the fertilizer ban and the country did have other problems. It is hard to deny the effect of going from food self-sufficiency to importing food.

You may have seen pictures of farmers in the Netherlands blocking roads with their tractors and farm machinery. They fear that government plans to cut nitrogen emissions will put them out of business. The Dutch raise a lot of animals on limited acres. The government has given local authorities one year to make plans to cut emissions 50 percent by 2030. They are giving the farmers three options - become more sustainable, relocate, or stop farming. The example of Sri Lanka should make them stop and think.

I know I have said this before. We eat the same food, drink the same water, and breathe the same air as everyone else. We are not going to foul our own nest. We farm the way we do to be productive and provide cheap food for this country and the world. We labor under many regulations and try to clean up our problems when they are shown to us. Putting farmers out of business in pursuit of an impractical utopia will lead to hunger and strife.

Farmers continue to be concerned about fuel and fertilizer prices. Gasoline prices have eased but the diesel fuel we use has not gotten much cheaper. Harvest is an energy-intensive operation. We use more than a hundred gallons of diesel each day in the combine, and we run 2 of them part of the time. The grain goes to the elevator or the bin in diesel trucks.

Fertilizer prices are hard to pin down. We hear prices have eased somewhat. The International Trade Commission ruled the United States cannot impose tariffs on imports of nitrogen fertilizer from Russia or

Trinidad. That is good news but as a nation, we do not import a lot of nitrogen fertilizer. It remains that fertilizer is a world market. Until the Ukraine - Russia situation is fixed, prices will be high.

It is in the news periodically that ships might be allowed out of the Black Sea. This would free Ukrainian grain and Russian fertilizer to move into world markets. After signing an agreement to open the port of Odessa, the Russians shelled the port. The main effect is to drop commodity prices in this country for a couple of days. The prices go back up when it becomes clear nothing has changed.

There is no easy solution to the fertilizer problem. Any new production facility will be expensive and a long time coming online. Fertilizer production still requires expensive natural gas as a feedstock. We are lucky because we are less dependent on imports than almost every other country in the world. It is still going to be expensive to get ready for the 2023 crop.

The Illinois Farm Bureau Board, along with leaders from some of the Illinois commodity groups, toured the container port of Savannah in early July. It is the third largest

volume of cargo in the nation. The ships, containers, trucks, and railcars were a little overwhelming. The ships are piled high with containers and there were acres of containers in the surrounding area.

The ships are not backed up at Savannah as we see on the west coast and the managers were proud of that. They do have the same problem with where to go with the cargo once it is unloaded. We saw many warehouses under construction. The container contents must be broken down and sent where it is wanted. The local Do It Best does not need a shipping container for one item.

Loaded containers are going out of Savannah as well. We toured a freezer warehouse and saw pallets of chicken thighs and legs headed to the port. Another high-volume export from Georgia is wood products. We saw a facility that grinds trees into wood chips headed to foreign markets. The trip brought home the complicated path of imports and exports.

We have been mowing and doing some repairs. We need to start going over our harvest equipment. Repair parts can be hard to find so we need lead time for anything we might need. Thank you for reading about agriculture this month.

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