



Southwest Family Farms

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Tale of Two Seasons

As we wrapped up the 2017 season, soil moisture conditions were perfect, because we received a lot of rain that October. After that wet weather pattern moved out, we did not receive ANY measurable precipitation for over 200 days. The wheat crop was hanging by a thread using only the moisture in the soil to survive the winter and spring, but it wasn't the only crop facing adversity. Typically, during the winter or spring, we receive some snow or early spring showers. This moisture aids in breaking down strip till clods and also helps fill the soil profile for the summer crops. With no rain in sight, we were forced to irrigate all of our crops after planting. Seedbeds were dry and cloddy, which made for less than ideal planting conditions. Corn seedlings suffered from fertilizer burn from being so dry. The newly established roots were growing quickly and seeking moisture in the soil, but instead they found ample fertilizer with little moisture. We had to work very hard to adapt to our conditions to get the crops emerged and growing by providing extra early season irrigation.

Despite this long dry spell, we were still able to harvest some respectable wheat yields. Looking back on October 2017, we remember how frustrated we were with the rains we received, as they kept us from harvesting corn for over 2 weeks. If it wasn't for those nice soaking rains, we would have likely faced a disastrous wheat crop. Farming is a continuous roller coaster with too much or too little moisture. It was frustrating, but during those frustrations one has to trust that the Lord will always provide, and we are grateful for the wet fall last year. He may not always provide what we want, but in this case it was certainly what we needed.

Two days after we finished harvesting wheat, the weather pattern changed for the better. We received above normal rainfall from late June until present day. Many fields received up to 22" of rain from June-December (Avg precipitation for the YEAR is 16-18"). The summer crops thrived in this wet weather pattern. In late June, a hail storm moved through north of Kismet and we lost over half of our cotton acres. Other crops were damaged as well, but they were able to recover for the most part. In Richfield, intense hail badly damaged several acres of milo and stripped the siding off of the farmhouse.

Overall, the wet summer helped provide adequate moisture and we were blessed to harvest nice yields. Our corn crop yielded slightly less than the past two years, but it was still above our 10 year average. The soybean crop was right on the average and the milo crop came in above average. We were happy to have another great year of crops despite the challenges we faced!

White Christmas?

If you recall from our 2017 newsletter, we grew cotton and planned to increase our acres this year. Well, we planted significantly more cotton this year, but the terrible hail storm at the end of June destroyed over half of our acres. The cotton was still small and vulnerable to the hail damage. It was too late in the season to replant cotton so we were forced to replant those acres to soybeans.

Cotton requires a lot of heat units in order to produce good, quality fibers. Our area is about as far north as cotton can be grown, so we have to apply plant growth regulators in order to promote fruiting and reproduction and to keep the plant from growing too tall. The wet, cool summer prompted the cotton crop to grow tall quickly, and it grew too tall in some spots. Timely applications of plant growth regulator were crucial to keep the plants shorter and to force the plants to produce bolls. We are learning more every year on how to manage the crop to achieve higher yields. Cotton is an exciting crop to grow with many challenges and obstacles to overcome, but the reward of a bright white field of cotton is a beautiful sight to behold.

This year we purchased a cotton stripper to ensure the timely harvest of our crop. The supply of these machines have been very limited and hard to come by. In years past, cotton harvest required 4-5 men to operate and support one cotton stripper. We had the cotton stripper, 2 boll buggies, and 1-2 module builders. The new cotton strippers have an on-board baler and can be operated by one man. The cotton is stripped and baled into an 8 foot, 4,200 pound bale. The bales are staged in groups of 4 to be picked up by trucks provided by our local gin in Moscow, Kansas. The cotton strippers come with a hefty price tag, but they also allow us to reduce the amount of support equipment needed during harvest. It also allows us to use our labor more efficiently to perform other jobs on the farm. Although the harvesting process is more efficient, one 8 row stripper still only harvests 6 ac/hr. With the short days and damp nights of winter, harvesting 50 acres in one day is quite an accomplishment. Luckily, we were able to wrap up cotton harvest on the last day of November. Had we not lost over half of our acres to hail damage, we would definitely be looking at a “White Christmas” harvesting more cotton.



Trade War and Tough Decisions Ahead

Over the past few months trade tensions between China and the United States have escalated and now tariffs on goods traded between the two countries have left a lot of fear and uncertainty among American farmers. When China imposed tariffs on milo and soybeans, they knew it would hit the US where it hurts. American farmers produce abundant crops and rely heavily on other countries (especially China) to purchase our products.

Some analysts say that the Chinese imposed tariffs have reduced soybean prices by \$2/bushel. Currently, local soybean prices sit at \$7.47/bu. Prices are very low and below break even on some fields, but several factors must be considered before we quit planting beans and look to another crop. Southwest Kansas already suffers from a huge negative basis locally. “Basis” is the difference between the cash price offered by local vendors and the nearby Chicago Board of Trade futures price. All of the soybeans we produce have to be trucked 180 miles east to a soybean crusher to be processed. A lot of dollars get tied up in the storage and transportation cost, making beans even less attractive to grow. However, soybeans work very well in our rotation for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, we have been able to achieve some very good yields, which helps offset some price disadvantage. Second, rotating corn and soybeans helps reduce input costs and raises yields for corn following soybeans. In a continuous corn rotation, more expensive seed is purchased and more pesticides are required to control insects and disease. Rotating soybeans with corn not only reduces our inputs, but it also provides a 10-20 bushel per acre boost to the corn crop. If trade tensions and tariffs don’t ease by next spring we could be looking at growing more corn or more cotton instead of soybeans.

Soybeans aren’t the only crop impacted by the tariff. China has been a large purchaser of milo (grain sorghum) in the past. Our dryland acres are typically rotated between wheat and milo. With the newly imposed tariffs, the flow of milo into China has come to a stop. With China not buying our crops, prices have plummeted. Typically we grow wheat and milo on our dryland, and we don’t have many other options for those acres. We can try corn or cotton, but neither crop provides the consistency that wheat and milo provide in our arid climate.

Our hope is that the trade dispute will get resolved. Most farmers agree that ALL Americans will benefit from free and fair trade. At the time of writing this newsletter, President Trump had just met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and they agreed to not implement any more tariffs and that each country would begin purchasing goods from each other. If the trade war doesn’t get resolved, we will have some major agronomic and economical decisions to make for 2019.

By the Numbers

American farmers depend on trade with other countries to buy our products. The numbers below show what percentage of each agricultural product is exported every year. It’s easy to see how heavily we rely on trade and exports to help purchase many of the crops we grow on our farm.

- ◆ 14% of Corn
- ◆ 50% of Soybeans
- ◆ 74% of Cotton
- ◆ 55% of Milo/Sorghum
- ◆ 46% of Wheat
- ◆ 37% of Corn Dry Distillers Grains
- ◆ 18% of Milk
- ◆ 10% of Beef

