

# Rainy conditions cause wheat yield slip

Acreage also expected to drop as some farmers abandon their crops.



*Ron Krausz, recently retired Belleville Research Center manager, shares information about research trials of 60 to 70 wheat varieties. (Photos by Daniel Grant) Published on: May 31, 2019*

The expression “rain makes grain” likely won’t come to fruition for Illinois wheat growers this season as they received way too much of a good thing. The constant barrage of precipitation since last fall could take a bite out of both yields and harvested acres across the state’s wheat belt, according to participants of the Southern Illinois Wheat Tour. This year’s tour projects an average wheat yield of 64.59 bushels per acre in southern Illinois, down nearly 1.5 bushels from last year’s state average.



Ed Marburger, a Mount Olive wheat grower, right, examines wheat samples with Illinois State Statistician Mark Schleusener during the Southern Illinois Wheat Tour. “We had a lot of water kill this year,” said Ed Marburger, a wheat grower from Mount Olive (Macoupin County). “We flew a drone over it, and we’ve got some brown spots and dead spots because of (excess) water.”

It's a similar story around the region. John Ernst, Illinois Wheat Association (IWA) vice president, said excess water damaged the crop in multiple ways. "Going around to the different fields (during the tour), we saw drowned-out spots and smaller heads than normal," he said. "Thirteen to 16 spikelets (per plant) seem to be about average, whereas in a normal year it would be about 15 to 20. That top-end (yield potential) is just not out there this year."

USDA projected a state wheat yield average of 67 bushels per acre last month, state statistician Mark Schleusener noted. The Ag Department will update its forecast June 11.

Meanwhile, farmers may not harvest as many wheat acres as expected this season due to the possibility of increased crop abandonment as the result of poor stands and other issues. In northern Illinois, some farmers tore up wheat fields in recent weeks in hopes of planting corn.

Wheat abandonment typically averages around 7% each year in Illinois. But Dave DeVore, of Siemer Milling in Teutopolis (Effingham County), believes abandoned acres could reach 10-15% this season. "I think what's there is going to stay (in southern Illinois) at this point," he said. "It's too far along to justify killing it now."

Ernst and other farmers estimate wheat harvest could begin about a week later than normal this season, unless the weather pattern suddenly shifts to hotter conditions that speed up crop development. He still hopes to plant double-crop beans. "Even after being kicked around the way this spring has gone, we should be thankful for the rise in crop prices," Ernst said. "It might give us a chance, even with lower yields, to raise a profitable wheat crop and double-crop beans."

Rich Cruthis, owner of RTC Cattle Farm in Sorento (Bond County), found a unique way to add value to his wheat crop. He sells the straw to local hardware and farm supply stores. "I moved about 1,500 bales my first year and thought, 'hey, this is pretty good,'" Cruthis said. "I never dreamed it would get to this point. I make more money off the straw than the wheat." Cruthis currently markets about 10,000 straw bales per year.

This year's wheat tour, hosted by IL Wheat Association, had five legs that originated from Siemer Milling in Teutopolis, Mennel Milling in Mount Olive, AgriMAXX Wheat Seed Company in Mascoutah, Wabash Valley Services in Carmi and Wabash Valley FS Services in McLeansboro. The tour concluded at the Belleville Research Center.